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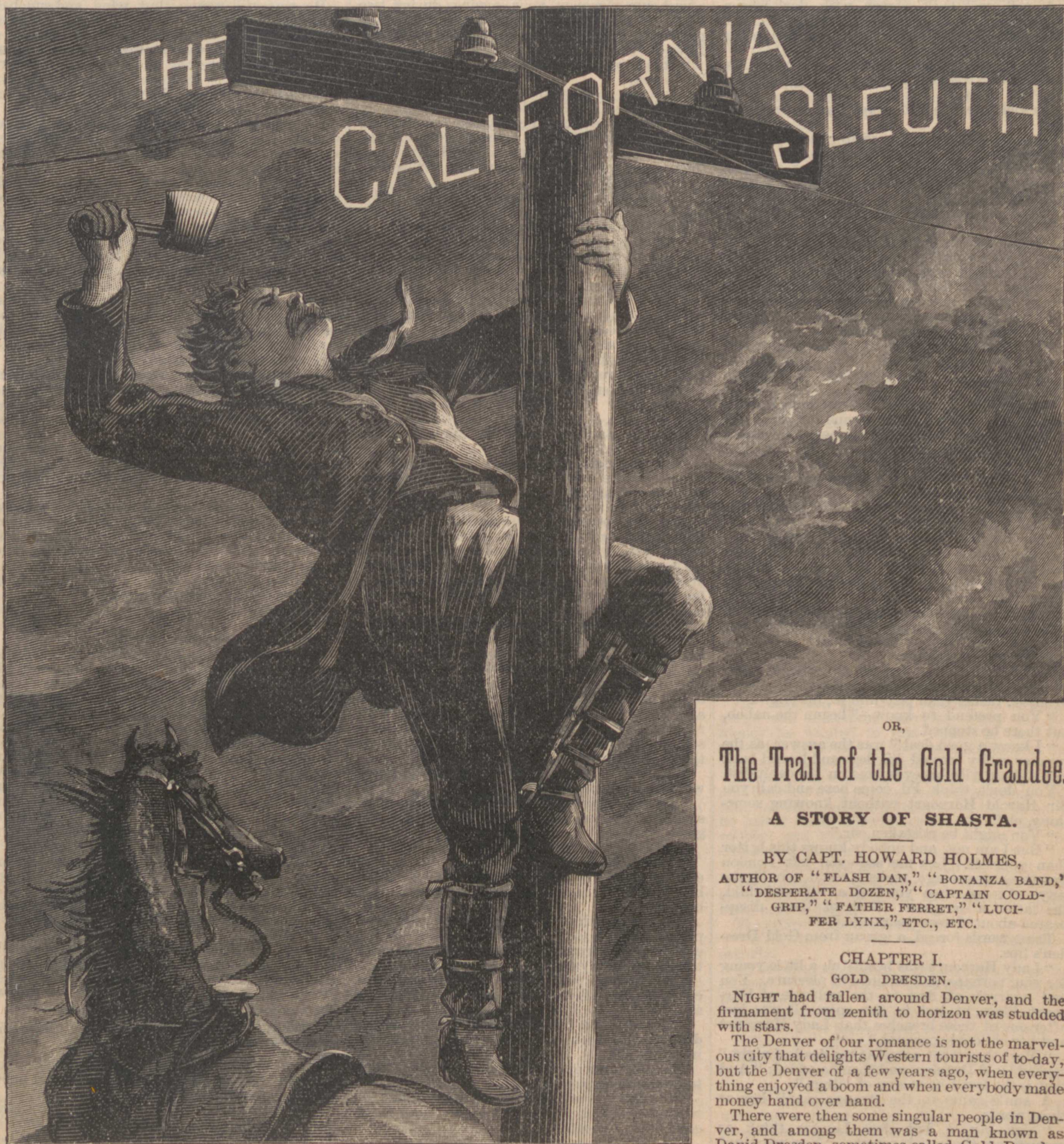
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ONCE, TWICE, THREE TIMES HE STRUCK, AND AT EACH STROKE A WIRE PARTED.

OR,

The Trail of the Gold Grandee.

A STORY OF SHASTA.

BY CAPT. HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "FLASH DAN," "BONANZA BAND,"
"DESPERATE DOZEN," "CAPTAIN COLD-
GRIP," "FATHER FERRET," "LUCI-
FER LYNX," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

GOLD DRESDEN.

NIGHT had fallen around Denver, and the firmament from zenith to horizon was studded with stars.

The Denver of our romance is not the marvelous city that delights Western tourists of to-day, but the Denver of a few years ago, when everything enjoyed a boom and when everybody made money hand over hand.

There were then some singular people in Denver, and among them was a man known as David Dresden, sometimes called Gold Dresden by people who spoke of his wonderful luck.

This man, who was about fifty years old, with a handsome but somewhat sad face, occupied a plain house.

He lived alone, or almost so, for the old man seen sometimes about the house did not come often enough to keep him company.

The most marvelous thing about Gold Dresden was his mining luck.

Everything he touched seemed to turn into money, and yet he never boasted of his wealth. He had not been three years in Denver, and yet he was said to be the richest man within its limits.

He had no intimates, but lived like a hermit in the house, with an occasional visit from the old man already mentioned.

On the night that opens our story—a clear, crisp night in November—Gold Dresden was destined to receive the most important visitor who had crossed his threshold since coming to Denver.

This man was not unexpected by the nabob recluse, for, late in the afternoon, he had received a note which prepared him in a manner for the visit.

David Dresden was seated in his library waiting for the caller.

Every now and then he glanced at his watch the hands of which were nearing ten.

At last a knock sounded on the door, and Gold Dresden opened it in person, for on that particular night he was the only occupant of the house.

He was greeted by a man who wished him good-night in a pleasant voice, and when he had ushered him into the library, Dresden turned and looked at his visitor.

A tall, well-built person, with dark-brown eyes and a reddish beard that covered his face, hiding the contour of his lips, stood before the Denver nabob.

He was well dressed and looked somewhat like the men who frequent the best gaming-rooms, of the Wild West.

Dresden knew he had never seen the man before.

Of course the nabob's visitor was asked to take a chair, an invitation no sooner spoken than accepted, and the next moment the two men sat face to face with one corner of a little table between them.

"You got my note?" asked the visitor.

"Yes."

"I am Edwin Alden. I have not been in Denver very long."

Gold Dresden was going to remark that he had never seen him in the city; but the caller leaned forward and continued with a smile:

"I will proceed to business at once. Are you going straight back to England?"

David Dresden started as if his visitor had tossed a bomb into his lap.

"To England?" he ejaculated. "What do you mean?"

"Why, don't you know that you have quietly sold all your mining stocks—some at a great discount, as if you had all the money you wanted—and that you have bought a ticket for New York?"

Gold Dresden seemed too astonished to articulate the slightest reply.

"You have 'struck it rich' in Colorado, Sir Harold," continued Alden.

"Sir Harold?" echoed the nabob hermit.

"Ah! I guess I know some things!" laughed the visitor. "You've kept the secret well from the Denverites; you have indeed! They don't dream that David Dresden is really Sir Harold Harcourt, a bankrupt English lord who fled from England to escape—what shall I say, Sir Harold?—notoriety, or punishment?"

There was no answer.

Gold Dresden's face had not a vestige of color, and the cool calculating man before him seemed to enjoy, rather than pity him in, his fright.

"You pretend to know—" began the nabob, but there he stopped.

"I know a good deal!" was the answer, as the speaker coolly crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair with his eyes fixed on the capitalist. "You don't think I'd come here and call you Sir Harold Harcourt without knowing something, eh?"

"You might be mistaken, sir."

"But I am not, and nobody knows this better than yourself. Let me see—you left London just three years ago, under a cloud, too, by the way. At one time you had a wife and child, the latter a daughter. Both of them disappeared about sixteen years ago."

These words forced a groan from Gold Dresden's lips.

"Lady Harcourt was beautiful, a little young for you, perhaps, and inclined to pleasure. You had quarrels, at first in the seclusion of Harcourt Place, at last in the open. It was just after one of these breaches that Lady Harcourt and her child disappeared."

"Yes; they went away at the dead of night," replied Gold Dresden, and then he added: "And that is the last I have seen of either."

A smile came to the strange man's lips at these words.

"You say so, but does London think as much?" was the quick retort. "You remained fifteen years in England after the disappearance.

They say you spent a great deal of money in a hunt for your family."

"I did. For years I had the services of the best Scotland Yard detectives!" exclaimed the nabob.

"And they with all their wonderful acumen found nothing?"

"Nothing!" echoed Gold Dresden.

"Think!" cried Alden, leaning suddenly toward the other. "Dare you sit there and tell me that no trace of your family was ever found? What was discovered in the depths of your deer park where old Doubleday's lodge used to stand?"

The nabob of Colorado flushed instantly.

"It is an infamous lie!" he cried. "They found some bones under the lodge, but nobody came forward to swear they were those of Lady Harcourt and her child Leonore."

"But you left England soon after this discovery," persisted Alden with a mendacious smile.

"What was there left to bind me to England?" was the response. "I had lost my estate. It costs something to keep a lot of detectives on the trail all over the world. I sold Harcourt Place to pay them, and when I landed in America I had hardly enough left to bring me to this country, where I hoped to get another start."

"A start for what?"

"To prosecute the search, which shall never end till I have cleared up the mystery that hangs over Lady Harcourt and Leonore!"

"Do you think you have it now?"

"I do."

"You intend to leave Denver to-morrow with a vast sum of money, your earnings during two years of luck among the miners! You have purchased, as I have already said, a ticket for New York?"

"It is here!" exclaimed Gold Dresden striking his breast.

"Do you expect to find the trail in New York?" asked Edwin Alden sarcastically.

"I cannot say, but I expect to put the case into the hands of the best detectives in America."

"You may do that, but you will never pay them out of your winnings for their services!"

"Why not?"

"Because I have come upon the scene with a hand full of trumps!"

Gold Dresden started again.

"What do you mean?" he cried.

The next moment Alden darted forward from his chair and one of his hands fell upon the nabob's shoulder.

"We are alone. I know it!" he exclaimed.

"Not a loud cry! as you value your life, Harold Harcourt, you want to keep a still tongue in your head! This is the Wild West of Uncle Sam's domain, and not Harcourt Place. I am here to make you start afresh on the trail you boast about."

"My God! You are here to rob me!" cried Gold Dresden.

The man standing over him laughed till his eyes got a demon glitter.

"Everything's fair in the Wild West!" he cried. "Here every man plays his own game, and I'm playing mine just now! You will submit to a little inconvenience, Sir Harold."

And the speaker drew something from his pocket and thrust it into the nabob's mouth, effectually gagging him before he could speak.

Then with some cords, which he also took from his pockets, showing that he had come prepared for a deed of violence, he lashed the astonished man to the chair.

The work was quickly done, and when Alden stepped back Gold Dresden was completely at his mercy.

"You see I'm not going to take any chances," smiled the villain. "You might sound a note of alarm if I did not fix your tongue. Of course all your wealth is in the house, and in this very room, for Denver does not know that you have sold out. I think I know where to find everything, Sir Harold."

The man went to one corner of the room where stood a good-sized safe.

"I need not ask you for the combination!" he suddenly laughed, glancing at his victim. "I guess you'd die before giving it up!"

Gold Dresden nodded while his eyes flashed.

"I thought so!" cried Alden. "But I have come prepared, as you see," and he took a little bag from beneath his coat and displayed a lot of burglar tools.

"A common thief after all, but he knows me!" passed through Gold Dresden's mind. "Will I ever be able to run this man down, and to solve the Harcourt mystery?"

From where he sat the Denver capitalist could see the red-whiskered man at work on the safe.

After awhile a hole was drilled through the door near the lock, and some powder was blown into it.

Then the man applied a fuse and stepped back to await the explosion.

The noise was not great when it came, but the result was a broken lock and a free road to the contents of the safe.

Gold Dresden saw the robber help himself.

He went to the front door and came back with

a valise which he proceeded to fill with packages of bills and papers.

He said nothing while he worked; but all the while his eyes glittered like a basilisk's.

The man in the chair looked on, unable to lift a finger against the heartless plunderer!

His enormous wealth was disappearing before his very eyes.

At last Alden shut the valise and got up.

"I guess I leave Dives a Lazarus!" he announced, turning upon Gold Dresden with a grin. "You will have to go to work again, Sir Harold! This is the best play I have ever made, and I've made a good many in my time! When you discover Lady Harcourt and Leonore let me know, will you? You'll have to hunt me up, first. I forgot that, but I won't leave you my address. I'm going now. The Scotland Yard detectives failed to find your family, and the best Yankee ones will never catch me! Good-night, my English pauper!"

The cool villain was at the door when he finished; a look passed between the two men, and Gold Dresden was alone again.

Alone and moneyless!

He could not call one dollar his own!

CHAPTER II.

THE ROBBER'S ACCOMPLICE.

"I OUGHT ter hear something purty soon. My agent said he expected ter close the bargain, or know why ter-night. Nine o'clock now. What! is ther clicker goin' ag'in?"

The man who spoke thus occupied an old arm-chair in one of the telegraph offices along the line of the Union Pacific in Colorado.

He was still young, but wind and sun had bronzed his skin. He looked like a gentleman sport, though he was not very handsome, and a pair of new pants were stuffed into the tops of the boots which rested on a high box before him.

Besides the operator the man was the only occupant of the little office.

He had come in an hour before to say that he was expecting a telegram from Denver, a message from his business agent, who was to sell his interest in a mine there.

He called himself Nicholas Norway, and intimated that the telegram might be in cipher, to which he held the key.

The operator had seen the man before. He had been about town for several weeks past, had conducted himself in a lawful manner, although it was understood that he was a sport of the first water.

Until that night, however, he had not said anything about the expected telegram; but the operator had no reasons for doubting his word, for nearly everybody in Colorado seemed to be dealing in mining stock at that time.

When the peculiar clicking of the instrument indicated that something was coming over the wires, Nicholas Norway lifted his feet from the box and leaned forward with curiosity in his eyes.

He watched the young man's hand as it transcribed the telegram, and when he saw a jumble of letters on the paper before him, his eyes began to snap.

"I guess this is yours," remarked the operator, pushing the dispatch toward his visitor. "This must be a cipher of some kind, for it is all Greek to me. It doesn't spell anything, and to me there's no sense in it."

"Mebbe not, but I guess it's what I'm looking for. It's for Nicholas Norway, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Paid?"

"Paid in Denver."

"A thousand thanks!" and the sport's hand closed on the paper, and thrust it into one of his pockets. "I hope they've sold me out to advantage. Them Denver bonanzas ar' kinder unsartin nowadays. Good-night, my clicker-king," and out he went into the night where the wind was blowing at a tremendous rate.

"It came sure enough, didn't it?" laughed the sport. "I'll go up and take the kinks out o' the thing. Mebbe something has ter be done ter-night. If he says so, done it shall be! The minin' stock yarn took well with the operator. Mebbe I never fooled anybody before! Well, I should chuckle."

He disappeared among the cabins and frame houses that made up the town, but soon reappeared in a small room over a saloon.

Seating himself at a table he drew forth the telegram and went to work on it with a "key" at his elbow.

To the uninitiated the message was a jumble of letters and figures, which looked like an insoluble cryptogram, but the man mastered it little by little, until he had produced the following:

"It will be done to-night successfully. Sever connection by ten o'clock!"

There was no signature to this message; but none was needed when Nicholas Norway knew the man who had sent it from Denver.

"By ten o'clock, eh?" he ejaculated, springing back from the table. "I guess I'm the chap to do that very thing with completeness. Jupiter Pluvius! what a haul it will be if he gets but

half of it? It's pounding away at ten now, so I'll go to work."

Five minutes later a man whose face was muffled with a red handkerchief rode from the Colorado town. He had the wind at his back and a barely discerned trail in front, but he galloped away as if he was riding over a broad road at noonday.

The muffled man was Nicholas Norway, whose dark eyes sparkled above the handkerchief.

He did not draw rein until he was several miles from town, and in a high-walled ravine through which ran the Union Pacific.

In the middle of the cut he guided his steed up to a telegraph pole, and began to fix something to his boots.

The wind was blowing a gale now, and dark clouds were chasing one another across the starlit heavens.

It was almost ten o'clock, and at that very moment in Denver, miles away, Edwin Alden the robber was knocking at Gold Dresden's door!

When Nicholas Norway had fastened certain straps supplied with sharpened nails to his boots, he mounted the saddle and began to climb the telegraph pole.

The wind threatened to tear him loose and fling him to the bottom of the cut; but he clung to his task with tenacity and kept on.

"A hurricane can't fetch me—not in a game like this!" he laughed. "Thar's more than stock-sellin' in this little episode in Nick Norway's life, ha, ha!"

He reached his elevated goal despite the efforts of the wind to shake him down.

There were three wires above his head; he felt them with his hand and then took a little hatchet from his belt.

Once, twice, three times he struck and at each stroke a wire parted.

Then he leaned back and struck savagely at the glass insulator which flew into a thousand pieces.

"That's what I call severing the connection!" laughed the man who saw that his work was complete. "If they get a message over that line, they'll probably carry it themselves!"

In a little while he was on his horse going back to the town with the wind in his face, and the black hair that fell below the broad brim of his cowboy hat streamed out behind.

"Ther message-taker kin go ter sleep over his clicker!" he suddenly laughed. "If he could hev read my message from Denver, he might hev smelled out a good-sized mouse. Aha! they don't beat Nick Norway and—well, an' ther prince!"

Nobody seemed to have witnessed the man's departure and return, so that the muffled face was unnecessary.

He went back to the little room over the whisky-den, and remained there for an hour.

"Hey!" cried a man, bursting suddenly into the room and startling its occupant. "Thar's a bonanza at ther 'Winged Angel' for a man o' yer luck."

Nicholas Norway looked up and regarded the man with a smile.

"What is it?"

"Thar's a tenderfoot from ther East thar, but ther boys hev'n't got a bit o' luck ter-night."

"I haven't got that which begets luck," replied Nick.

"No dust, eh?"

"Not a dollar!"

"We'll fill yer up."

"Buzz Saw knows that Nick Norway never borrows!" was the quick rejoinder. "How long will the victim stay?"

"We might keep him awhile."

"Till after one?"

"Perhaps."

"Keep him—play with him—do anything!"

cried Nick. "Is he worth playing for?"

"I should say he war. He's a walkin' bank."

"All right! Keep him till after one. I'll be there then with the devil's own luck."

"I believe it, Nick!" laughed the man who was a sport after Nick's pattern, but much handsomer. "You've got a chance ter make a raise between now and one, eh?"

"I have!"

Nicholas Norway was again the only tenant of the little room and his visitor was going back to the Winged Angel faro den.

A short time later the sport's humble apartment was quite empty, and a lynx-eyed man might have seen him near the Union Pacific depot, which was soon to be reached by the train from Denver.

"Thar she comes!" exclaimed Nick, catching sight of the headlight far down the track, and then he watched it approach with unconcealed delight.

As the train began to slow up, the Colorado sport sprang lightly aboard and entered the forward coach. His dark eyes were on the alert; they saw every thing as he passed down the aisle.

All at once he stopped and leaned toward a man whose eyes met his with a look of recognition.

"Was it done?" asked the passenger in a whisper.

"Yes."

The next moment the man took a somewhat bulky pocketbook from his bosom and thrust it into Nick's hand.

"Good-by!" said the passenger as the cars moved again. "Remember! Silence and discretion!"

Nick's eyes fairly sparkled.

"Good-night, captain," he returned and the next minute he stood by the track watching the train disappearing in the starlight.

Back to his room once more went Nicholas Norway.

This time he locked the door behind him and hung his hat on the key. Then he took a seat at the table and began to open the package he had received on the train.

The second wrapper concealed a lot of greenbacks of large denominations and Nick counted them with much eagerness and agility.

"Seven thousand short!" he suddenly cried. "Where is the lyin' rascal?" and he bounded to his feet and turned like a tiger toward the door.

"He said I should have twenty thousand for my share; but here is—what? only thirteen thousand!"

Then he went back to the pile of money on the table and looked at it as if he meant to tear it to pieces.

"Only thirteen thousand!" came through his set teeth. "Have I helped him to success to be swindled in this manner? By Jupiter! it looks that way! Where is he going to stop?—Ah! Where? He said good-by as if it meant farewell, and I remember that we were not to meet any more unless he summoned me. Of course he'll not do that with that pile of money seven thousand short. Well, some o' these days, captain, I'll make it up. By heavens! I'll charge interest, too!"

Instead of venting his disappointment and spite on the greenbacks, Nicholas Norway counted them carefully again, but with the result already obtained.

There were but thirteen thousand dollars in the pile!

If he had received it for cutting three telegraph wires and smashing an insulator, it was enough; but Nick was not satisfied.

"I must not forget the tenderfoot at the Winged Angel!" he suddenly exclaimed. "If luck is mine I may make up the deficiency; but that will not prevent me from collecting from the captain in the future!"

He went out and down to the faro-room.

The tenderfoot had been kept for him, and the game began.

It was daylight when Nick Norway emerged from the play-house.

His face was white; his lips even seemed to have no blood.

"A tenderfoot, eh?" he grated. "The man in there is a card-sharp from Sunrise! Never mind! I'll follow the captain and collect."

He walked off with empty pockets and blood-shot eyes.

Nicholas Norway had been fleeced!

CHAPTER III.

PUTTING A SLEUTH ON THE TRAIL.

BACK TO DENVER!
It is the morning after the robbery we have witnessed.

The inhabitants of the mountain city are early astir, but there is no sign of life about Gold Dresden's house.

There are some people in Denver who believe that he has quietly left the city.

They are the men who have purchased his mining-stock, and they have promised to say nothing about his going away, as he wished to depart quietly.

At last a man approaches the house—an old man, stooped, and with a sorrowful countenance, and the same person seen sometimes about the premises.

He knows something which busy Denver has never discovered—that David Dresden is really Sir Harold Harcourt, the Englishman.

The old man enters the house by a rear door and goes straight to the library.

"My God! what is this?" he exclaims as he crosses the threshold and sees Gold Dresden in the chair, wild-looking and colorless, apparently dead.

In a moment he is at the Englishman's side, and then he discovers that the nabob is alive.

A knife flashes for a moment, and the cords fall apart, then the gag is removed from the victim's mouth.

"Aha! Doubleday, is it you?" asks Gold Dresden. "Why didn't you let me die here?"

"It will never do!" cries the old man. "Remember the ledly an' Leonore!"

"Yes, yes! But what can I do now?" and the speaker threw a glance toward the plundered treasury whose open doors tell the tale of robbery.

All at once he leaves the chair and totters across the room, and the next moment sinks on the floor before the safe.

"The prince of thieves took everything!" he groaned. "Doubleday, how am I going to hunt for the trail without a dollar at my command?"

"The mines!" exclaims the old man. "You forget—"

"Ah! you forget that I sold them yesterday,

that the money for them was put here last night. Come and look at the nest now. May the vengeance of Almighty God fall upon the demon who did this satanic work!"

Gold Dresden came back to the chair and dropped into it with a groan that seemed to find an echo in the heart of the old man whose eyes were brimming with tears.

Doubleday said nothing but watched Gold Dresden closely while he waited for him to get calm enough to give an account of the human eagle's swoop.

"He knew me, Doubleday," said the robbed nabob, looking up into his companion's face.

"Who knew you?"

"The man who came last night! He called me Sir Harold. He told me that Lady Harcourt and Leonore disappeared sixteen years ago; he knew a great deal about our hunt. And then he spoke about the bones found where your old forest lodge used to stand."

Old Doubleday started at the words; but Gold Dresden did not notice it.

"That man must be an old enemy," the nabob went on. "He seemed to take delight in the thought that he was keeping me from the trail to which I was about to return. He laughed about the failure of the Scotland Yard detectives. He said the best American sleuths could not find him. Ah! Doubleday, we have to commence again. I cannot employ the New York ferrets for I have nothing. That night-hawk came just when he knew he could damage me most. He knew I had all my wealth in money; that I had sold my stocks, and that I had a ticket for New York in my pocket."

Doubleday was eager as his looks showed for Gold Dresden to finish.

"What was this man like?" he asked, at the first opportunity.

"He was disguised. I saw that before he left. The reddish beard was a mask for it moved whenever he talked—not much, of course; but enough to render me suspicious."

"What did he take the money off in?"

"A valise."

"A black one with some brass mountings?"

"Yes! I saw everything to that. But, why do you ask, Doubleday?"

"I saw that man."

"You? Where?"

"At the Union Pacific depot."

"Did he wear a red beard?"

"No; the man who had the black valise with the brass mountings had no beard at all. His hair was dark and his face was quite smooth."

"Did he go away?"

"He did."

"On what train?"

"The last one north."

"Whither bound?"

"I don't know."

"He may be captured!" exclaimed Gold Dresden almost springing from his chair as eager excitement lit up his eyes. "You saw the right man last night, Doubleday. I am sure of it! Denver will learn of my misfortune sooner or later. We must stop that man! I will go secretly about it as long as I can. Bring Captain Dagobert of the police to me."

Doubleday departed and in a little while a good-looking, sharp-eyed man of forty-five entered the library.

It was Captain Dagobert of the Denver police.

Gold Dresden gave a brief account of the robbery, described the man and his valise, and told about Doubleday's adventure at the depot.

"We may telegraph ahead of the train and have him held if he is still aboard," said the officer.

"Do it!"

The Denver bankrupt sunk back into the chair and waited for the officer's report.

He imagined the train rushing on through gorge and mountain carrying away all the money he wanted in this world; he saw the glittering eyes and the cool, satanic smile of the man who had plundered him.

At last he saw the train stop at a small town, and boarded by a fearless-looking marshal. He followed the man down the aisle of the car until he halted beside Edwin Alden, the mysterious robber; and then he saw the villain in the clutches of justice!

Dagobert's telegram had found the thief!

Gold Dresden saw all this with half-closed eyes, but the awakening, the reality, was the bitterness of death.

The officer came back at last.

"Well, how is it?" asked the Denverite, eagerly.

"The telegram couldn't get through," was the report. "The wires are down between here and Buzz Saw."

An ejaculation of despair from Dresden's lips. "What fiend threw them down?" he cried.

"The wind last night, probably."

Dagobert could lay it to the wind, for he did not know that Nicholas Norway's hatchet had done the work.

Gold Dresden sat silent in his chair for five minutes, watched by the officer, who wanted to speak, yet who seemed afraid to disturb him.

"You don't know what I wanted with that money!" the crushed nabob exclaimed, when

Dagobert was about to break the silence and run a risk of being rebuked.

"No."

"It was to give me forty years of life, or to hurl me into the pit of despair!" was the reply. "I was going to New York to-day. I intended to find the best detectives money can buy in this country! The celebrated Captain Coldgrip has retired from business, I am told; but I was going to put him into the field again."

"Oh, you wanted some mystery cleared up, eh?—something before this robbery?"

"That is it!"

"Well, you were going a long ways to find a ferret?" smiled the Denver policeman.

"Where is a good one nearer?"

"Right here in Denver."

"Impossible! I never heard of him. There is but one Captain Goldgrip."

"And only one Crimson Claude!" exclaimed Dagobert emphatically.

"I never saw the man."

"I presume not. He has not been in the city for four years. He came here yesterday. We know Crimson Claude, the California Sleuth. He never fails!"

"Then you want me to put this case into his hands."

"I can recommend him," was the modest answer.

"But there isn't a dollar in yon safe, where there were many thousands last night!" exclaimed Gold Dresden. "You see I can promise this man everything, yet be unable to pay him a copper."

"Let me show him in."

"Where is he?"

"Just outside the door," replied Dagobert to the Englishman's astonishment. "I picked him up on my way to the depot."

Gold Dresden leaned back in his chair.

"For Heaven's sake, let me see your California Sleuth!" he exclaimed.

Dagobert looked like a man who had won a victory. If there was anybody who believed that the Wild West surpasses the East in everything it was the captain of Denver police.

Dagobert was born and raised west of the Mississippi; he believed in nothing east of it.

The man in the chair watched the door with a great deal of eagerness. He was burning with a desire to see the man recommended by Dagobert.

Then a step was heard and the two men came forward—the policeman, and the person called Crimson Claude.

"This is the gentleman," said Dagobert, with a wave of the hand. "This is Claude Cresson, commonly called Crimson Claude, the California Sleuth!"

Gold Dresden found himself confronted by a fine-looking personage of five-and-thirty—a man with a remarkably clear eye, a well-shaped head, and a faultless figure.

There was just enough dandyism about the new detective to render him fascinating without making him objectionable.

His only facial adornment, a very black mustache, was carefully waxed at the ends, and under his chin was a crimson necktie from which tiny article of wearing apparel he had received a name well-known throughout the Wild West, that of Crimson Claude.

"I like that man already," mentally confessed Gold Dresden. "A little too much style, perhaps, but that is his business. I think I can trust him."

Five minutes after the introduction Dagobert withdrew, and the California Sleuth was alone with the bankrupt nabob.

Acting on the theory that he could unbosom himself to the man who, a few minutes before, had been a perfect stranger, Gold Dresden went back over his life and laid it bare to Crimson Claude.

The California detective smoked quietly or twisted his mustache while he listened to the narrative which he did not once interrupt.

"I believe my wife to be dead," remarked the speaker at the finish. "But my child—my Leonore! She must be living somewhere. All my heart is wrapped up in her existence. I have told you why I suspect that Lady Harcourt and her daughter came to America. I have mentioned the mean acts and the wiles of the two enemies I had in England. The man who beggared me last night knew me for Sir Harold Harcourt. I am penniless in a strange land; but I want the mystery that hangs over my family cleared up! I want the man of last night run down! I put the whole thing in your hands, Crimson Claude. For God's sake help me!"

Crimson Claude removed his cigar and said coolly:

"It shall be the work of my life, Sir Harold!"

The Englishman uttered a glad cry.

CHAPTER IV.

LEONE OF CONDOR CITY.

"I DON'T see why a man can't die without being watched like a hawk by Bradd Brownell, the Gold Grandee! He seems to fear that I might take a turn for the better when every chance ar' ag'in' me. By Jericho! my life has

been a dead failure all through. I'm a pauper when I should have been a bonanza king. I should be rich in Frisco when I am dyin' dollarless in Condor City! Whar is Leone? Ah! she's gone after Buzzard Belt. If it warn't for shock-in' ther poor girl, I'd like ter die now—now, an' have it all over!"

The man who cried out thus from a cot in a small cabin deep in the mountains of Northern California was worn to a skeleton.

His skin was the color of a mummy's—dark and dry on his bones.

He was the only sick man in Condor City, a mining-camp lying almost in the shadow of Mount Shasta.

For three months he had groaned on that poor cot, wearing away to a skeleton, with nothing in the future for him but the touch of the finger of death.

His condition had been brought about by a sudden fall from his horse, which had taken fright in the mountains, had he and been conveyed to Condor City injured beyond the skill of its unlettered surgeons.

Of course there were men willing to nurse him, but there were gentler hands than theirs to administer to his wants.

The sharer of Lasso Pete's little cabin was a young girl named Leone, by some called his daughter, by others his ward, and she had been unremitting in her attentions.

Condor City, like many other gold camps in the Wild West, was cursed with one-man rule.

Lasso Pete, in the agony of his last day, had spoken the autocrat's name—

Bradd Brownell, the Gold Grandee!

Even while the injured miner gave utterance to the words we have recorded, the face of this man was at the window of the little cabin, and his eyes were fixed upon the occupant of the cot.

A fine-looking personage he was, physically perfect, handsome of features, and the intellectual superior of every citizen of the camp.

"Why doesn't death claim his own?" asked this man at the window. "I don't see any sense in this delay, and yet it goes on from day to day and he remains the same. Just as if he intends to cheat me by keeping breath in his body! It has been this way for three months. He was dying, apparently, when they fetched him back, yet there he is—no better, no worse. This is a shame! I'm tired of waiting. Why doesn't death throttle him and give me a chance?"

Bradd Brownell heard a light footstep, and the next moment he drew around the corner of the cabin to prevent being discovered by a young girl who came up and joined the man inside.

The next instant the Grandee was at the window again, and a glance told him that the girl had left the door slightly ajar.

"Well, Leone, child, is he coming?" asked Lasso Pete.

"Not just now, I'm afraid," was the reply.

"Which means that Buzzard Belt isn't in Condor City just now?"

The girl hesitated. She did not like to tell a falsehood, yet she had not the heart to tell the sick man that Buzzard Belt was not in camp.

"Well, it makes no difference whether I see him or not," was the reply, as Lasso Pete rightly interpreted Leone's hesitation. "It would be a farce to make anybody my executor, but I would like to tell Buzzard Belt something."

"He'll be here soon enough," answered the girl, cheerfully.

"I've got no gold-mines, no rich pockets and no mysterious maps of hidden treasure, Leone," he went on, a smile stealing across his sadness-darkened features. "But I've got you, girl—worth more than all the gold in the ground," and his arms were placed about Leone's neck in an affectionate manner.

"In all Condor City—more, in all California—I have but one friend to whom I can leave you, and he, I fear, doesn't possess the discretion he ought to have," he suddenly resumed.

"Buzzard Belt?" whispered the girl.

The sick man nodded.

"There are more disreputable men in Condor City, Leone, but what are they?" exclaimed Lasso Pete. "There are men here who know more about the world than Buzzard Belt does, but they are the abject slaves of one man! They are the tools of Bradd Brownell, whose touch withers everything it meets!"

As the man uttered these words Leone threw a frightened glance toward the door, and did not see the glittering eyes at the window.

"He has dropped in here a dozen times within the last two weeks, hoping to see me pass in my chips, Leone," Lasso Pete continued bitterly. "The one curse that blights Condor City is the presence of that man! I know what he is waiting for. I know why he wants to see me lying without motion on this cot. In one respect I am a mountain pauper, but while I have a breath in my body I am richer than he, despite his enormous wealth. He waits for my death like the vulture waits for the fall of the traveler staggering across the parched mesa. I don't want him to have his desires fulfilled! Leone!"

The girl stooped until her face almost touched the lips of the speaker.

"I believe I'm not going to see Buzzard Belt again," whispered Lasso Pete.

"Oh, yes!" smiled the girl, though a sudden pallor took possession of her face. "He will be here by daylight."

"So will I, but with no more aches," was the response. "Leone, I am going to demand an oath of you."

The girl started.

"An oath?" she repeated after him.

"Nothing else! I have feared that I might drop off some time when Buzzard Belt would not be near to hear my last instructions, and so, by degrees, I wrote them out for him as my strength would permit—day by day, a line now and another then. I want you to deliver the message to Buzzard Belt when he comes and to swear to obey him in everything. Remember! in everything, Leone!" And there was a singular emphasis to the last sentence.

"You have but to ask me," she cried. "If you say oath, an oath it shall be."

"I would sooner have it that way, Leone," answered Lasso Pete, looking up into the girl's face, and then one of her hands stole into his, and he went on:

"In God's presence you swear to do this, child?" he said.

"I swear it!" and after a fervent pressure his grasp relaxed and Leone withdrew her hand.

"The message for Buzzard Belt is concealed in the bottom log over in yon corner," resumed Lasso Pete looking toward one corner of the cabin. "The light will show you a little piece of wood fitted into the log. A knife blade will secure the message for you. When Buzzard Belt comes, put it in his hands and remember the oath you have taken."

"It shall be as you wish, as you say!" exclaimed the girl.

"That makes a man feel easier," and Lasso Pete sunk back upon the pillows of the cot. "I guess the dark gates that open upon the unknown kin open, now, for Lasso Pete the richest mountain pauper thet ever slung a pick!"

Leone seemed to see a sudden change in the man who lay in the light of the cabin lamp.

An exclamation of fear passed her lips as she bent over him and slipped one of her fair arms under his head.

"Merciful God! he is dying!" she cried.

There was no reply, though Lasso Pete seemed to make an effort to talk. One of his hands that moved upward as if to draw Leone closer suddenly fell back, and his eyes became fixed, upon her.

"This is the end—the end he has waited for so long!" passed through the girl's mind. "The day his horse threw him in the mountains shall ever be the blackest of my life. Oh, Pete! Pete! I shall be alone in this wild camp if you go! Merciful Father preserve him for me—my best friend!"

The girl ceased suddenly as if she had seen some terror, and the next moment she started back with her eyes riveted upon the face on the pillow.

It was all over!

Lasso Pete, the sufferer of Condor City, had reached the end at last.

"Alone! alone!" moaned the girl, starting up. "His friend, Buzzard Belt, is to take his place as regards me. He never seemed to trust him fully, but he said that all the others are Bradd Brownell's tools. Is it true?"

A moment later, and even while the question seemed to seek an answer in the cabin, a knock at the door surprised the girl.

"Heaven be praised if it be Buzzard Belt!" escaped her lips as she sprung to the door.

She caught the latch's handle and opened the portal to greet—the handsome face and glittering eyes of the Gold Grandee!

An involuntary shudder passed through Leone's frame; she knew not why, but she had no power to check it.

"I was just passing, Leone, and I thought I would drop in to inquire after Pete," said the Gold Grandee with the suavity of a modern Mephistopheles.

"What! don't you know?—no! You cannot, for it has just happened!" cried the girl, and then lowering her voice she added sadly:

"He is dead!"

Bradd Brownell feigned great surprise, and threw a quick look toward the silent figure on the cot.

"No! it cannot be!" he exclaimed, going forward as if he had not seen the miner die from his station at the window.

Leone followed him, and with trembling hand took the little lamp from the table and held it near the dead man's face.

"I was in at the death for all," mentally rejoiced Bradd Brownell, concealing a smile of triumph from Leone. "I have waited three months for this hour. They've been three years to me. Now I guess I'll show Condor City, and, after awhile, Frisco and the coast a hand that'll astonish people."

The next minute he turned upon the girl.

"This sad event leaves you alone, I believe," he remarked.

"Yes, alone, but the cabin falls to me."

The Grandee of Condor City threw a contemptuous look about the room, and his eyes seemed to bestow considerable attention to a certain corner.

"Permit me to offer you a home in my house," he went on. "It is large enough, I guess, and, besides, you deserve a better home than this."

Leone thought of the house to which Bradd Brownell referred—a house which, as the wonder of the gold region, shall occupy a prominent place in our story—she thought of it twice before she answered.

"Not now," she replied. "This cabin must be my home until I can decide."

"Until Buzzard Belt gets back to give me trouble," decided Bradd under his breath, but he showed no signs of displeasure.

"Very well!" he smiled. "Remember that I have offered you a home. The boys will come and give Pete decent burial. Good-night, Leone." And the girl saw the autocrat of Condor City walk from the cabin.

"Hello! hyer you ar'!" cried a man who greeted Bradd Brownell a few steps from the cabin. "Thar's a visitor up at the house, cap'n."

"Who is he?"

"Nobody knows. He wants ter see you, he says."

CHAPTER V.

OLD ACQUAINTANCES.

CONDOR CITY was one of those gold camps that spring up like mushrooms wherever the precious metal is found.

As has been said, it was situated in Northern California, almost in the shadow of stately Shasta.

A short time prior to the opening of our story there was no sign of a gold camp where Condor City now stood. It had risen like magic under the hand of man, and at the command of one person.

This individual was Bradd Brownell, the so-named "Gold Grandee," whose large house stood on a raised piece of ground in the center of the camp.

Within the limits of the camp were the mouths of several mines, which produced a good deal of fair ore, but which were not bonanzas as such things are rated in the Wild West.

The Gold Grandee had surrounded himself with luxury.

His house was magnificently furnished in every particular.

His carpets had been imported at great cost from the East, and the mountain tough could walk over them and make no sound.

His tables and mantles were topped with marble, the walls were adorned with splendid paintings, and there was a large library filled with rare and costly books.

An establishment of this kind in the Shasta region was something to talk about, but, strange to say, it was not known far beyond its portals.

Bradd Brownell seemed to revel in all this luxury alone.

He had the fortune of a Monte Cristo at his command, and he spent it only to further adorn the palace he had erected in the heart of the golden paradise of California.

Of the man himself nobody seemed to know anything. He did not see fit to reveal himself to any one, though it was said that he had one confidant, an old miner whose great accomplishment was music.

It was said that this man, who was called Shadow Simon, was very fond of books, and that he was the best patron the Gold Grandee's library had.

The house was roomy, and, exteriorly, imposing. From a lookout on the roof a fine view of the surrounding country could be obtained, and Shadow Simon was often seen there with a spy-glass at his eye.

No wonder, then, that Bradd Brownell was startled when he was told that a strange visitor was waiting for him in his own house.

Why had Simon admitted the man, for Simon knew all his friends and all his enemies, if he had any?

The Grandee threw a farewell look at the cabin where Lasso Pete lay dead and started off.

The man who had brought him word about his visitor walked at his side until he was dismissed with a few words spoken in low tones, and Bradd kept on alone.

"I'll give the fellow whoever he is to understand that I'm keeping no hotel!" muttered the king of Condor City as he went up the slope to his house.

He was met at the door by Shadow Simon—a singular look in the old man's eyes.

"Well, who have you admitted?" began Bradd.

"The puzzle is that I don't know; he got in before I got a good look at him, an' he said that you wouldn't turn him out when you came."

"He says I won't, eh?" flashed Bradd in tones that might have penetrated to apartments beyond the door. "Where is he?"

"In the library."

"You watched him through 'the king's eye'?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"He didn't attempt to investigate."

Brownell was silent for a moment.

"You are *certain* you have never seen him before?"

"I am quite sure."

"Is he American?"

"Up to the handle."

"Well, I'll investigate," and the Grandee started for the library door.

A moment later he turned the marble knob and walked in.

The room was not brilliantly lighted, but there was a soft glow everywhere, enough to show the Gold Grandee the man who had taken possession of the big arm-chair, in which he sat with crossed legs like a man at his ease.

As Bradd entered the room, the visitor fastened his eyes upon him.

"Hello! I thought you would never come!" he exclaimed.

Something in the tones seemed to startle the Gold Grandee.

At any rate he took a hasty step forward and halted before this stranger.

"I guess you've forgotten me," the man in the chair continued with a smile.

Bradd Brownell's eyes were fixed on a broad-shouldered and handsome man, with a short full beard and dark eyes. He filled the chair as if it was made for him, or he for the chair.

A lamp with gilded ornaments was hanging above the visitor's head, and Brownell threw up his right hand and turned on a little more light.

When he saw the man before him more fully he seemed to shut his teeth hard.

Bradd Brownell undoubtedly recognized him.

"I presume you wasn't looking for me," smiled the occupant of the chair.

Brownell said "no" before he thought, and then he threw a glance toward a portrait of a king that adorned the wall.

"You've got a boss ranch hyer," continued the caller, taking in the room and its sumptuousness with a quick glance. "It's better than you used to have."

Bradd Brownell was uneasy, but he controlled himself with an effort and drew up a chair that happened to stand within arm's reach.

"Where did you come from?" he asked his visitor.

"From everywhar!" was the reply. "I've been roughin' it ever since."

Bradd Brownell did not ask the man to be more explicit. He seemed to know what the words "ever since" meant.

"You're well fixed hyer, cap'n," the stranger went on.

"I'm comfortable."

"Livin' in a golden palace an' got a bonanza ter draw from."

"Not a very big one."

"Mebbe not, but big enough ter let yer cancel my debt."

"What debt?" demanded the Gold Grandee.

"Mebbe it war more of a mistake than anything else," the stranger went on, smiling.

"Don't yer recollect it, cap'n?"

Brownell shook his head.

"Then I'll hev ter refresh yer memory. It war two years ago, and ther night Gold Dresden lost his chips in Denver."

The man paused as if to see what effect his words had had, but, to all outward appearances, Bradd Brownell was as calm as usual. He had not stirred.

"Well, cap'n, that night a sartain chap not necessary ter name hyer received a package o' Uncle Sam's currency. Ther delivery war made at Buzz Saw. When ther money war carefully counted it war found ter be seven thousand short."

A twinkle appeared to dance in the depths of Bradd Brownell's eyes.

"Seven thousand short?" he echoed. "Are you certain of this?"

"Wal, I should articulate. Didn't I count ther pile ag'in an' ag'in? Seven thousand short. Not a dollar less."

"It was a mistake," said the Gold Grandee, but the look he got from his visitor at that moment seemed to give the lie to his remark.

"It war down right robbery; but never mind, cap'n, I'll get thar," mentally ejaculated the man in the chair.

"So you want the mistake corrected?" asked Bradd.

"That's what I'm hyer for," and then he added: "I'll take interest at twenty per cent, for that seven thousand hes put me ter lots of trouble since I didn't get it, ha, ha!"

The Gold Grandee laughed with the man.

"Where's your law for twenty per cent.?" he cried.

For the first time the visitor seemed to slip his good nature.

"Necessity knows no law, and then mebbe it weren't such a gigantic mistake after all," and his last words sounded like a challenge of Brownell's honesty.

"What will you do with the money?" he suddenly asked. "You can't spend it in Condor City."

"I don't want ter," was the prompt response. "Mebbe this ain't ther only gold paradise in existence."

Bradd Brownell looked at the man a moment

longer, and then shut his lips firmly as if he had resolved upon a certain course of action.

"I'll settle the claim on one condition," he announced.

"Well?"

"That you go away to-night."

"Yes."

"Never to come back while I'm here?"

"Agreed!"

"Who told you that I was here?"

"I found it out for myself."

"You've been tracking me, then?" and a spasm of resentment seemed to contract the Grandee's face.

"Who wouldn't look up ninety-eight hundred dollars?" grinned the autocrat's visitor.

Bradd Brownell made no reply, but walked into an adjoining room and closed the door after him.

The stranger leaned back in the chair again and counted the seconds with a smile of triumph on his lips.

Presently the Gold Grandee came back with a package in his hands, and his visitor's eyes alighted instantly upon it.

Seating himself at the table, Brownell spread out a lot of notes and began to count them in silence, an operation which his caller performed at the same time.

"Is it right?"

"All right, cap'n," and the man reached out and took the money, when Brownell turned his eyes upon him.

"What ever became of *him*?" he inquired.

"I don't know."

"He left Denver?"

"Yes. After you went away fortune seemed to desert him. They say he went to the new Arizona mines. Anyhow he disappeared. It war a big haul, ha, ha, an' ther Union Pacific people never found out who cut ther telegraph wires that night."

Bradd was in no humor for laughing, as if the hush money he had just paid over irritated him.

"I guess his spotter dropped ther case when he found thar war no bank ter draw from," the man in the chair went on.

"He enlisted the services of a detective, then?"

"Oh, yes. I found that out. Ther day after ther Denver pull he ran across Crimson Claude, ther California Sleuth, but Claude didn't, nor couldn't, find out anything. Thet game war a daisy, cap'n! It is as mysterious ter ther Denverites ter-day as is ther loss of Lady Harcourt and her daughter, Leonore."

The speaker seemed to bring up an unpleasant subject to the gold king of Condor City, and Bradd hastened to intimate rather broadly that he wished the interview to be considered at an end.

The man got up and strode toward the door with the money in his bosom.

"Good-night, cap'n," he exclaimed with a ludicrous salute. "I hope you'll continue ter reign king o' this ophir land. Accept ther best wishes of yer old pard, Nicholas Norway, an' ef you ever need another helpin' hand call on him!"

"Good-night!"

Bradd Brownell's parting was like the meeting of a tiger's teeth.

"I got off cheap after all," he exclaimed turning back to the table. "He was the last man I looked for to-night, but I always thought he'd be after that shortage sometime. Where is Simon?"

He was answered by the appearance of the Shadow, who came into the room at that moment.

"You saw and heard all from 'the king's eye,' eh?" ejaculated the Gold Grandee as the old man came up.

"Everything."

"Hereafter all strangers are to be shown into the left hand room," he went on.

Simon's eyes twinkled.

"If I had known the man I would have shown him into it," he laughed. "If he comes back—"

"He says he will not, but if he lies, Simon—if the Colorado vulture returns for more blood, don't consult me. You know what to do!"

Shadow Simon bowed and showed his teeth again while Bradd Brownell walked into another room, and put one ear to the mouth of a tube that extended down the wall and beneath the floor.

CHAPTER VI.

BUZZARD BELT COMES HOME.

ALONE in the little cabin of Condor City Leone watched in the light beside the figure stiffening on the hard cot.

The girl had a right to feel alone in the world, for Lasso Pete had been her friend and protector a good many years, and now that he was gone, Leone felt that she had lost the truest friendship she had ever seen.

When she thought of the miner's last words and of the vow she had taken she went to one of the corners of the room and found the block set in the log.

With the point of a knife-blade she pried it loose and brought to light a folded paper which she knew was the message Lasso Pete had left to Buzzard Belt.

The girl knew she had no authority to read

the paper, so she hid it away, resolving to give it to Pete's friend at the first opportunity.

When she had possessed herself of the message she replaced the block and went back to her vigils.

After awhile, when the greater part of the night had worn away, several footsteps were heard beyond the door and three men came in.

The visitors were dark but kindly-featured fellows who walked forward and looked in silence at Lasso Pete before they said much to Leone.

The girl knew them all; they were citizens of Condor City.

When they told her that it might be prudent for her to withdraw as they were going to prepare the dead for the little cemetery at the edge of the camp, Leone gave Lasso Pete a last look and left them to themselves.

Not very far from the cabin the girl knocked gently at a door until it was opened and she glided in to stand face to face with a woman of forty, with fair black eyes nestling while they sparkled beneath raven lashes.

"It is all over," said Leone going forward. "I have come to you for sleep, for rest if I can get any."

In an instant the dark eyes seemed to lose their intensity; they grew soft.

"Who saw him die?" asked the woman called Silver Sybil in the camp.

"We were alone."

"Nobody at the window?"

Leone was startled by the question.

"There could have been no one there," she replied.

"It came sooner than I expected," Silver Sybil went on. "We all knew he was doomed and he knew it, too. It is strange that he made no sign."

"No sign about what?"

"About the accident that sapped his life."

Leone thought of the paper she carried for Buzzard Belt, but she did not mention it. If Lasso Pete cleared up any mystery in it she knew it would be known in the course of time.

Ten minutes after her arrival at Silver Sybil's home the girl was trying to sleep on the couch from which she had roused the woman.

Silver Sybil herself was not to be seen, and Leone was the only occupant of the cabin.

After awhile she fell asleep and when she opened her eyes again the morning of another day had come.

"Sybil is not here!" exclaimed the young girl, quickly discovering that she was the only person under the cabin's roof.

At that moment the door swung open and Silver Sybil reappeared.

"Buzzard Belt has come!" cried the woman.

"Where is he?"

"I left him at your cabin. He is there alone."

Leone was thrilled by the thought that Buzzard Belt had come back, and yet she could not tell why.

"I will go to him at once," she ejaculated.

"He will come here to find you."

"It is my duty to find him!" was the response, and the next minute Leone was on her way.

In a little while a man kneeling in one corner of a cabin was startled by the opening of a door and the entrance of some one.

"You?" he exclaimed, springing up and facing Leone who stopped at sight of him. "Did he tell you anything before he crossed over?" And the man came forward and looked into the girl's face.

"He told me to give this to you," she replied, producing the paper she had taken from the log, and the very document for which the man was evidently searching when she came in.

Buzzard Belt took it from her hand with a good deal of eagerness, and Leone watched him with intense curiosity.

Without another word the man, who was a real mountain athlete, a little tanned, and with strikingly handsome, seated himself on a three-legged stool near the corpse and began to unfold the paper.

While Leone made no attempt to steal more than a glimpse at it she could see that it was traced in poor chirography much like the kind a weak and unlettered man would perpetrate.

Buzzard Belt read it through with no sign that the contents astonished him.

Leone thought that they only confirmed something already in his mind.

"He might have told me all this, but he never would," said Buzzard Belt, glancing at Leone with a smile. "Some people like to let a piece of paper talk after they are dead."

The girl went forward as if she thought that Buzzard Belt was about to reveal the contents of the paper, but his look quickly disappointed her.

"Do you want to go away from here?" he suddenly asked.

"Must I go?" was the answer.

The man smiled.

"I did not say so," he replied. "Did I even intimate that you are to go?"

"I thought so."

"Well, go you shall, but not just now. Is Silver Sybil your friend?"

"She is."

Buzzard Belt was silent for a moment.

"Did you promise Lasso Pete to obey me in everything?"

"I did."

"He did not exact an oath, I hope?"

"He did, and I took it," answered Leone, promptly.

"Brave little girl!" ejaculated Buzzard Belt.

"Well, my first wish is that you make Silver Sybil's cabin your home. Now tell me all what happened here last night."

For the next ten minutes Leone did the talking. She detailed Lasso Pete's last hours even to the remotest particulars.

A smile played with her lips when she told how Bradd Brownell had offered her a home in the big and mysterious house on the rise.

It made Buzzard Belt smile, too, but with the smile there lurked a singular glitter in his eyes.

"Why didn't you go?" he asked the girl.

"Must I go yet?" she exclaimed. "Do you want me to accept Bradd Brownell's offer?"

And she laid her hand on his arm and held her breath while she waited for his reply.

"Not yet, not yet, Leone!" he laughed.

"What is the big house on the hill?" exclaimed the girl. "They say—"

She stopped, as if she did not like to repeat camp-gossip.

"What do they say?" asked Buzzard Belt.

"Go on, girl!"

"They say it is a palace inside, that the floors are covered with the finest carpets, that magnificent pictures adorn the walls, that the mantles are marble—a real palace it must be!"

"A golden misery!" declared the miner, and then he glanced at the dead man at his feet.

"Lasso Pete knew all about it," he went on.

"All about the Gold Grandee's paradise?"

"Yes."

"He never told me a word," exclaimed the astonished girl. "When did he enter it?"

"Between two days to satisfy a curiosity which he could not suppress," was the response.

"He saw the rich carpets, the wonderful paintings and the marble work. If those lips could move, Leone, they would tell you that he saw more than those things."

Leone's surprise was unbounded. She looked first at the marble face on the cot, and then into Buzzard Belt's eyes.

Why had all this been kept from her?

If Lasso Pete had crossed the threshold of Bradd Brownell's palace, why had he kept its sights from her ken?

For a moment Leone was upbraiding the dead for what had been kept back.

"The Gold Grandee will not stop with one invitation," remarked Buzzard Belt, breaking in upon her thoughts. "He will ask you again to transfer yourself to the house on the hill."

"Well?"

"When he does you will accept."

Leone started with a strange cry.

"I don't like Bradd Brownell!" she protested. "Besides, Lasso Pete hated him, and I guess the feeling was mutual."

"Indeed it was," assured the miner.

"And you want me to live in the house of mystery, to—"

"Yes, because I say so, and you have sworn to obey me in everything, Leone," and the girl saw the eyes of Buzzard Belt fastened on her with a look of authority. "He may not renew his offer of asylum for some time; but when he does, remember that you are to accept it."

Leone was silent.

"Before that offer comes you will receive certain instructions from me," continued the miner. "Everything in that house is on the grandest scale; it fits Bradd Brownell's purse to a 'T.'"

"Then you have been there?"

"No, I have never crossed its threshold, but I know," was the retort.

"If he knew it—"

"He would probably attempt to relieve the world of Buzzard Belt of Condor City!" laughed the miner. "Leone, much depends on your living beneath the roof of that palace. I am going to trust you to play an important part in a deep game."

The girl looked the astonishment that she felt.

"In entering the Gold Grandee's house, you enter a web of mystery and fate. There isn't another dwelling like it on the continent. Another could not be built. It has more uses than one, as you will find out."

"To my cost, maybe," the frightened girl added.

Buzzard Belt shook his head.

"Never mind. You will find out soon enough," he answered.

"I remember that you have not lived here as long as we have. We were here when you came. Did you know Bradd Brownell before you saw him in Condor City?"

"Not as the Gold Grandee."

"But you had heard of him?" persisted Leone. A light laugh was Buzzard Belt's first reply.

Then he said:

"There, my child! Bridle your curiosity for a while. A deep, dark drama has been played in the past and another may be near at hand. Let me request you to go to Silver Sybil's. This is the day for the last sad rites that we pay our friends. Be strong, be courageous!"

He spoke the last words in a manner that seemed to bring a new light into his eyes, almost entirely transforming him.

A thrill passed through the girl's heart and the next moment her hand was on his arm.

"I believe you are more than Buzzard Belt!" she exclaimed as her clutch tightened. "I ask you to be fair with me. Remember! I am going into the house of mystery at your command. Who are you besides Buzzard Belt? What is your work here?"

He looked at her a moment as if he was about to gratify her desires; but he caught her gently and led her to the door.

"Not now, Leone," he said, firmly. "Go to Sybil's house. There, that is a good girl," and she was dismissed with a look she could not resist.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SECRET BONANZA.

"So I am to go away and leave him, eh? I am to depart immediately, too! He didn't squeal much over the seven thousand with its twenty per cent. interest. Well, he oughtn't ter, seein' ter what I've helped him to in the past. Jupiter! what a palace he's built thar, an' why? Ah! that's what puzzles me. Why thar?" and the speaker stopped short on the mountain trail and turned his face toward Condor City.

He was Nicholas Norway, the man whom we have seen walk from Bradd Brownell's palace with nearly ten thousand dollars in his pocket.

"What ef I should go back?" he went on, smiling as he uttered the words. "He seemed almighty anxious to get rid o' me. Why? What is on ther boards now, Bradd?"

Five minutes later Nick Norway was walking toward Condor City.

What did he care for his word?

"I'm goin' ter find out somethin' before I go away," he muttered. "Thar may be more in this than nine-eight hundred for me. When I cut the telegraph wires at Buzz Saw I got him a clear path to safety. Don't I know that the Denver authorities tried ter get a telegram through ther next day—one that would have caught him in spite o' fate? I baffled 'em with my little hatchet for what—a package of greenbacks seven thousand short!"

Nick Norway went back to the mountain camp, but not to the house he had just left.

"I used ter know a chap who left ther Eel River camp some years ago. He used ter say that some day ther gold paradise would be found right hyer in ther Shasta kentry. He got ter be a monomaniac on that subject, an' ther last I heard o' him he war on his way ter Shasta, ter live er die on his prophecy. Mebbe he's hyer now. If I could find Diamond Dart I might obtain a basis o' operations. Whar shall I begin?"

Nicholas Norway passed like a specter between the cabins of Condor City.

Some were darkened and silent, and others lighted up.

He slipped up to more than one window and studied the inmates of its shanty through the dirty glass.

In nearly every instance they were amusing themselves with cards at rough tables, and the man outside would scrutinize their faces in his hunt for the man he had known years before.

The search, as it lengthened, seemed to presage failure.

It would be a chance card if he found Diamond Dart in Condor City.

In one of the cabins into which Nick looked, sat a young girl near a cot on the floor.

"Thar's a dead man under that coverin'," ejaculated the Western sport. "I didn't know I war approachin' a corpse. Her father, probably. By Jupiter! ther girl is a beauty, too. Left alone in Condor City. A chance for the cap'n, ha, ha!"

For several minutes the rough fellow stood at the window and watched the tableau composed by Leone in her vigils over Lasso Pete.

He looked the girl over and over.

"A beauty like that oughtn't ter be hyer!" he exclaimed. "I'd like ter lift ther sheet an' take a peep at ther face under it; but not for ther world would I disturb ther girl in her sorrow."

Nick withdrew with a lingering look that impressed the image of Leone on his mind.

"If I could find the old pard!" he ejaculated.

"If I only could run across Diamond Dart!"

There was no hiding place in Condor City for him unless he found a friend.

He would be compelled to turn his back on the gold camp and to relinquish the plan to find out why Bradd Brownell had built his palace where it stood.

"Hello, pard!" suddenly cried a voice as Nick was drawing near the last lighted cabin.

The sport turned and looked in the direction from whence the sound came.

A man stood a against the door of a hut beside the one Nick was approaching.

There was no light in the window of the second cabin, and this is why the Colorado sport had failed to see the man.

"Hello yourself!" responded Nick going forward.

"Ar' you watchin', too?" queried the Condor City citizen with a puzzling smile.

By this time Nick was at the door which the man was holding open as if he wanted him to enter.

"I'm watchin' nobody in particular," said Norway. "I'm lookin' for a man, an old pard I used ter hev; but I guess it's like lookin' for a tack in a river."

"Mebbe so ef Californy's yer huntin'-ground," was the response.

"Who might ther pard be?"

"Diamond Dart o' Eel River."

The man in the door seemed to start.

"Come in, anyhow," he exclaimed. "I'll let my man go for a spell. Diamond Dart, eh?"

"Yes."

Nick had crossed the threshold by this time, and the miner was finding a light.

"Mebbe I kin clear up the mystery!" he exclaimed with a light laugh as he wheeled upon Nick with a small tin lamp in one of his hands. "Just take a survey of the face before you an' see if thar's any resemblance ter—"

"Diamond Dart himself!" interrupted Norway, clutching the man's arm and pushing him back in the frenzy of delight.

"Well, if this ain't a solid vein, shoot me for a coyote!"

"An' you are Nicholas Norway?" was the response. "Nick Norway the Eel River speculator—"

"Who speculated an' starved, eh? ha, ha!" laughed the Colorado sport.

The next minute was passed in a study of each other's faces, and the two men again shook hands and congratulated each other over the unexpected reunion.

"Well, Diamond, have you found the gold paradise you used ter preach about?" suddenly asked Nick.

"I think I'm not a thousand miles from it," answered the miner, lowering his voice in a mysterious manner. "When did you come in?"

"A while ago."

"Since dark?"

"Yes."

"Then you haven't seen much o' Condor City."

"Not much."

"Well, we've got somethin' hyer they don't have in all camps," and Diamond Dart's eyes sparkled while he talked. "We've got a gold-bug as is a gold-bug, an' a palace that beats anything in Californy."

"Why does it exist here?" asked Nick, who did not see proper just at that time to tell Diamond Dart that he had entered the big house since sundown.

"Why? I guess its owner could enlighten you, Nick. Mebbe you'd better go an' ask him!" and then the speaker laughed. "Let me tell you—Bradd Brownell came hyer flush; so they whisper who ought ter know. Thar war no Condor City hyer then. Did you ever see Bradd?"

"Go on," was the strange response.

Nick could hardly repress a plain, blunt answer to Diamond Dart's question.

"Bradd Brownell owns nearly all the men o' Condor City, body an' soul!" continued the Shasta miner, and then he added with flashing eyes as he caught Nick's arm:

"But he doesn't own me!"

"I'm glad o' that, Diamond. Mebbe Bradd Brownell has found the gold paradise you used ter prophesy about in the Eel River camps."

"I can't say that he has, but he has found somethin'!"

"In the shape of gold?"

"He has found a bonanza! He owns every spot o' ground in Condor City exceptin' what my shanty stands on. Hyer is my claim, which no man kin buy till I choose ter sell."

"Did he ever try ter buy it?"

"Not directly. He comes hyer sometimes an' pokes his head in at ther door an' sings out: 'Whenever you want ter move, Diamond, let me know!' I understand what that means. He wants this little claim ter complete his ownership of Condor City. But he couldn't buy me out if he war able ter throw Californy at my feet."

"Go up ther hill an' look at thet house in ther mornin'," continued Diamond Dart. "Then go inside—if you kin—an' take in all its richness an' beauty."

"You've seen it, then?"

"Me? Jupiter, no!" and Diamond Dart drew back and laughed at Nick's question. "I guess I'm ther last man Bradd Brownell would let into his gold palace. Next ter me he wouldn't let Lasso Pete in, but Pete ar' dyin' by inches from a fall from his hoss in the mountains."

"Mebbe that war the dead man I saw in one o' the shanties a while ago."

"With a young girl near by?"

"Yes."

"That war Pete!" exclaimed Diamond Dart. "Dead at last, eh? I wonder if Bradd's eyes won't laugh when he hears of it?"

"Who is the girl?"

"Lasso Pete's claim."

"Any relation of his?"

Diamond Dart slowly shook his head.

"That's what nobody seems to know," he

said. "I guess she'll drift inter ther palace on the hill now, unless she goes over ter Lasso Pete's only pard, Buzzard Belt. However, my opinion is that Bradd will win the play. He's king hyer."

"An' you ar' his subject, ain't you, Diamond?"

"By glory! I am no man's subject!" cried the miner. "Between you an' I, Nick, an' I guess our Eel River friendship holds good in Condor City, I hate the nabob on the hill. If he draws a breath I like, I'd like to know it."

"What has he done to you?"

"Nothin', but I don't like him."

"I never saw one man hate another for nothin'," smiled Nick. "At some time Bradd Brownell has touched your toes, eh, Diamond Dart?"

"Well, confound it, he has!" ejaculated the Condor City sport and miner. "I don't mind tellin' you, Nick. I believe that Bradd Brownell has discovered what I used ter prophesy about."

"The Shasta bonanza?"

"Yes."

"Then you don't know for certain?"

"No; but let me show you something."

Diamond Dart went to the little window and dropped a curtain over it.

"I'm goin' to show you the work of years," he continued, coming back to Nick. "Water droppin' on a rock day after day wears it away, you know."

Nicholas Norway nodded.

"Now I'll show you what I've accomplished."

A minute afterward Diamond Dart lifted a trap-door in the floor of his cabin, and displayed a dark, yawning chasm, like the mouth of a well.

Filled with curiosity, Nick drew near and looked into the black gulf.

Across the opening stretched a heavy iron bar, and an object like a rope-ladder dangled beneath and lost itself in dark space.

"I want you to go down there," suddenly said Dart, looking into Nick's face. "You're used ter thet kind o' climbin'. Descend into my mine an' report."

With the smile of a bravado on his face, Nicholas Norway stooped and lowered himself upon the rope-ladder, which looked strong enough to bear two men like himself.

"You don't need a light," exclaimed Diamond Dart. "Go down to the bottom an' use your ears."

"All right!"

The following moment Nick was going down the swaying ladder which appeared to have no end.

He touched ground at last, and found himself in a small place with stygian gloom on all sides.

Overhead he saw the faint glow of Diamond Dart's lamp.

"He told me to use my ears," he laughed to himself at thought of his old pard's advice.

For the next few seconds the man stood in pitch darkness and listened.

At first he heard nothing, but after awhile he caught the sound of miners' picks and occasionally the rough laughter of men.

Like a p'rson charmed by the sounds, Nick Norway listened at all sides of the dark shaft.

There were dozens of men at work under ground and not a great way off.

Now and then he would catch the words of some wild stanza sung in chorus by several men, and then it would die away among the clicking picks.

"I guess I can get at Diamond Dart's hints about Bradd Brownell's bonanza," exclaimed Nick. "Mebbe I've feathered my nest in comin' back ter Condor City. What's that?" and he leaned against the wall to hear this chorus:

"Woe to the wretch who tries to find
The golden depths of our Grandee's mine!
Woe! woe! woe!"

"Mebbe we'll prove that a lie!" rung out the voice of Nick, and a moment later he was climbing the rope ladder hand over hand.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE GOLDEN WEB.

"WELL, what do you think of it, old fellow?" was the question that greeted Nicholas Norway when he reappeared at the top of the cabin shaft.

The face of the Colorado sport still bore traces of astonishment.

"There is a mine not far away," he ejaculated.

"I should say so."

"You've heard the picks often?"

"A thousand times," answered Diamond Dart.

"Many a time I've gone down there an' listened to them an' to the songs the miners sing while they work."

"Well, what do you think of it?"

"It is Bradd Brownell's bonanza," was the reply. "The men who handle the picks are his tools, his slaves. That is one of the secrets the big house on the hill shuts in."

"Don't the sounds down yonder seem to come nearer?"

"Not much," answered the Condor City sport with a smile. "I've heard them often during the last six months."

"Who are the miners?"

"A question more easily asked than answered."

"They belong to Condor City?"

"Mebbe so."

"Haven't you tried to find out?"

"Oh, I've played spotter a little."

"With what result?"

"With none very satisfactory. The path to Bradd's secret leads across the threshold of the mysterious house."

Nick Norway was silent for a spell.

"Why didn't I try to reach it?" he thought.

"I was in that very house awhile ago. I sat in the library a long while before the cap'n came. I might have investigated, but did not. I have been a fool."

Then he said to Diamond Dart:

"If the secret can be reached only through the house, we can solve it."

"We?"

"You an' I! I guess you'll not object to formin' a partnership with your old Eel River friend?"

"No!" cried Diamond Dart catching Nick's hand. "Let this be the firm of Norway & Dart."

"Or Dart & Norway! I care not which!" was the response. "We will get at the secret. It is worth fightin' for."

"We will fight for it! Now, what have you found out?"

"There is a man who is, beyond doubt, in the Grandee's employ," said Diamond Dart. "He spends the most of his time at the house. He knows all its secrets. When he comes out it is to play at the cabins till he loses his money. We call him Shadow Simon. I was keeping an eye on him when you came up. He was in the cabin next door, gettin' fleeced as usual."

"Is he there yet?"

"I'll take a look," and Diamond Dart glided from the cabin leaving Nick alone.

In a moment the Condor City sport came back with a look of disappointment in his eyes.

"He is gone, and the shanty is dark," was the report. "We must enter the house when Simon is not on guard, for when he is there no strangers get in."

Nick smiled to himself, for he recalled the success he had met with in his attempt. He had entered the house despite Simon, had walked in with the assurance of Satan himself.

"I think I could do it again," he said to himself, "but I'm not goin' to attempt it for awhile."

It was agreed that Nick should make Diamond Dart's cabin his secret quarters.

Nobody had seen him come back to Condor City, and Bradd Brownell thought he was miles away.

He was exceedingly fortunate in finding Diamond Dart with such little trouble, and he knew that he had secured a partner who was eager to risk everything, even life itself, for the Grandee's secret.

Bradd Brownell could delight himself with the thought that the payment of a few thousands of hush money had sent Nick Norway off; but the truth was that his prompt payment of the demand had fastened the cool human leech upon Condor City.

The next day Diamond Dart appeared as usual among the cabins, while Nick kept under cover.

It was the day for Lasso Pete's funeral, and the whole camp turned out to do honor to the man whose long suffering had secured the sympathy of all save the inmate of the gold palace on the hill.

Leone, supported by Buzzard Belt, walked after the corpse to the grave made for its reception on the mountain-side, and the rough faces saddened when the young girl dropped her tears on the clods that covered the unfortunate man.

She parted with Buzzard Belt at the door of Silver Sybil's cabin, and he had said in a low voice:

"Remember! you are to accept Bradd Brownell's offer of an asylum when it comes again," and before Leone could reply, the new guardian was gone.

There was a look akin to triumph in Buzzard Belt's eyes as he walked from the girl's new home toward his own cabin.

"I told him over his loss in Denver that a certain thing should be the work of my life," ejaculated the man. "I haven't been idle since that day when Gold Dresden, of Denver, put the case in my hands. Since then I have run down several theories with poor success. My employer is disheartened, but I am not. I never quit a trail. I believe I am on the right one at last. It remains to discover the secret of the Gold Grandee and to see that the man of many crimes gets his just deserts. There is one who can get at this secret, and I will employ her. Leone suspects that I am not Buzzard Belt. I wonder if she ever heard of Crimson Claude, the California Sleuth, and Gold Dresden's sworn detective?"

The speaker was beyond the door of his cabin before he finished.

Shutting it carefully behind him, he took a paper from his bosom and began to read it slowly.

It was the same one Leone had given him at Lasso Pete's cabin.

"I've got it all in my head now, but I will preserve the paper, anyhow," he murmured, and in a little while he had concealed it in a small box which he found by lifting one of the boards of the floor.

"Leone knows what to do when Bradd Brownell comes with his proposition," he went on. "I have told the girl just enough to make her courageous, and the gold-bug on the hill—the man I have watched for months—will find his match in the fly he wants to inveigle into his golden net."

Buzzard Belt had hardly turned from concealing the paper when his door was thrown open, and Silver Sybil stood before him.

The day was nearly at its close, and the long shadows thrown by the sinking sun were casting Condor City in darkness.

There was eagerness and anxiety on Silver Sybil's face. She came forward quickly and stopped before the sport.

"Are you Leone's best friend now?" she inquired.

"I am."

"I want to know—"

The woman stopped and colored.

This woman had some mystery connected with her life.

She had come to Condor City alone some months before the present occurrences and had quietly taken up her residence in the cabin she inhabited.

Some said she had fled from the tyranny of a husband, others averred that she was an adventuress who would try to ensnare Bradd Brownell, but nobody pretended to know just what she hinted at.

Silver Sybil seemed to feel that she was moving a little too fast with Buzzard Belt.

She had never had much conversation with the man.

"What is it?" asked the sport with a smile.

"What do you want to know?"

"I fear you would not tell if I asked," she exclaimed. "Why should you? You don't know who I am. Silver Sybil is all you know. I know what the men of Condor City say about me," and the woman laughed, showing the white teeth that helped make her beautiful. "I want to know if Leone is to go to the gold palace if Bradd Brownell offers her a home there?"

"Did she tell you so?"

"In a moment of forgetfulness," was the answer. "I don't blame the girl. She couldn't keep it, Buzzard Belt. The blame rests on me. But tell me—is she to go?"

"She is."

In an instant Silver Sybil's eyes seemed to catch fire.

"Are you that man's agent?" she exclaimed.

"What does he pay you for your work?"

Buzzard Belt laughed.

"She shall not go!" Sybil went on clenching her hands. "You cannot throw that girl into the web of the golden spider."

"Why not?"

"Because Silver Sybil will stand between!"

"Just as if one woman could prevent!" laughed the man, and before the woman could resume his hand darted forward and closed gently on her wrist.

"Seriously, Sybil, you don't want to interfere. Let Leone go. She knows what she is about."

"So she says. She puts implicit trust in you, and you tell her—ay, even command her—to put herself in the power of the Gold Grandee, who is a mystery himself, inasmuch as nobody in Condor City knows his antecedents. Give the girl to me. As her guardian put Leone into my hands."

"What would you do with her?"

"I wouldn't send her into the palace of death!" was the response, the eyes of the speaker flashing again. "Can't I have Leone, Buzzard Belt?"

The handsome sport shook his head.

"Then I will not be responsible for what happens!" she exclaimed, drawing back.

"What do you mean?"

"Wait and see! Leone is not to be thrown into the lion's den!"

"It is for Leone's good."

Silver Sybil broke out into a sarcastic laugh.

"For the good of your purse!" she cried. "I see through the whole plot. You have been Bradd Brownell's friend all along. You made yourself Lasso Pete's pard in order to be made Leone's guardian so as to place her in the palace! It was a shrewd game, sure enough, Buzzard Belt. You need not take off the mask now. I see you in your true character—Bradd Brownell's property!"

Silver Sybil spoke with a bitterness that almost made the man wince.

"If you can win in the end, go on!" she went on. "I don't intend to appeal to the men of this camp. Without exception they are the slaves of the nabob on the hill. But I didn't think this of you—you who pretended to be Lasso Pete's friend, and he hated the very ground owned by the Shasta Grandee!"

The next moment Silver Sybil threw the door wide open and walked out with a proud look of majesty in her sparkling eyes.

"Good-day," laughed Buzzard Belt after her.

"You will think better of me by and by."

The answer was a look of scorn which needed

no reply, and with a smile on his lips the Shasta sport saw the woman disappear.

"Another person who doesn't like Bradd Brownell, but I always knew this!" mentally ejaculated Buzzard Belt. "I could force an apology from Sybil by speaking twenty words; but I won't dispel the illusion yet."

Silver Sybil went back to her cabin.

As she crossed the threshold her eyes caught sight of a piece of paper that lay beside the little lamp on the table.

"What is this?" she exclaimed, snatching up the paper, and then with eyes that seemed to start from their sockets she read:

"Colonel Brownell has offered me a home and I have accepted. I shall not be far from you, Sybil."

"LEONE."

The face of the woman grew white and her hand crushed the paper.

"So soon?" she cried. "The girl is lost!"

CHAPTER IX.

UNEXPECTEDLY CONFRONTED.

LEONE was gone.

She had taken up her abode in the house on the hill.

"I did not think the play would be made so soon," ejaculated Silver Sybil when she had recovered from her surprise. "The girl has fallen into the golden web. Shall I let her go? I can see through the infamous conspiracy that accomplished this end. Buzzard Belt has been Bradd Brownell's tool all along. All Condor City is at his feet. What can I do single-handed if I oppose him?"

A short time before Sybil had left Leone at the cabin, but now the crushed note told a thrilling story.

All at once the woman turned toward the door and went out.

Did she think that she might get between Leone and the gold web?

In the starlight stood the great house which at that time had no equal in the gold domains of the Wild West.

"I hate you and everything that is yours, Bradd Brownell!" grated Sybil as she halted on a spot from which she could see the house.

"What is that, woman?" said a voice at her elbow.

Silver Sybil turned as if a snake had hissed at her side.

"Who are you?"—one of his slaves?" she ejaculated, leaning forward while her eyes sparkled.

She was confronted by a man she had never seen in camp before, a person who did not belong to Condor City.

"I thought I heard you say that you don't like the king bee of that big hive yonder!" was the man's response.

"Perhaps I did say so," answered Sybil.

"What if I did?"

"This is a free country, an' we've got a right ter hate whom we please."

"And that man especially!" cried Sybil, throwing a fierce look toward the house.

The man smiled.

"You don't belong here," Sybil went on.

"You are not a Condorite."

"Why not?"

"I know you are not. Will you come down to my house?"

The man nodded and followed Silver Sybil back to her cabin where the little lamp still burned on the table.

For several minutes the woman looked her companion over and then smiled when she addressed him.

"I know you!" she exclaimed. "You look a little like you did when you used to be called the Prince of Bismarck."

The man was seen to start and his eyes became riveted on Sybil.

"You don't know me, eh?" she cried.

"I do not."

"You are Nick Norway!"

There was no reply.

"I am Silver Sybil of Condor City. I used to be the Countess of Colorado."

A smile played with Sybil's lips while she spoke, and her eyes seemed to get a glitter from the times to which she referred.

"I have heard of you," said Nick Norway, "but I did not know you had penetrated to this region."

"A rolling stone, my friend!" laughed Sybil. "You're pretty much the same, I see. Where is your bonanza, Nicholas?"

"It is to be found," was the reply.

"Like all such things! Well, since the countess and the prince have met, let us become friends. Shall it be so?" and Sybil thrust a hand forward while she looked intently into the man's face.

Nick seemed to hesitate.

He had lately formed an alliance with his old friend Diamond Dart. Why form another with this woman?

"Very well," flashed Sybil, seeing his hesitation and seeming to read his very thoughts. "You reject the offer, do you? That is your own business, Nicholas. The Countess of Colorado can get along without an alliance of any kind. Maybe you can not."

There was a significance in the last sentence as well as in the manner in which it was spoken.

"You were looking at the palace a while ago," suddenly continued Sybil. "Do you want to buy it?"

"No."

"Maybe you want to become the Gold Grandee's guest," she went on, smiling.

"If I do I will become such a person!"

"You?"

"Why not?" exclaimed Nick. "You probably know enough about the Prince of Bismarck, Sybil, to know that I'm no tenderfoot."

The woman leaned back in the chair she occupied and looked across the table at her guest.

Nick spoke with a great deal of earnestness.

There was a cool smile at the corners of his mouth.

"Don't you know that Bradd Brownell owns this camp?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Then you know, too, that its inmates are his slaves."

Nick inclined his head.

"You can't play prince here. The Grandee has been everywhere."

"At sight of you he will say 'there is the Prince of Bismarck,' and he will set a trap for you. This is an exclusive camp; there's not another like it in California. The palace on the hill is a house of mystery."

"I know all this!" exclaimed Nick, with an impatient gesture. "I am pretty well acquainted with the man on the hill."

"Friend or foe?" asked Sybil, with much curiosity.

"Just as he will have it," was the reply.

"Well, he will not have it 'friend' if he suspects you," smiled the woman. "Suppose you go up and greet Bradd Brownell."

"Not to-night," laughed Nick, as he seemed to recall. "I was just taking a survey of the house like yourself. I heard you say that you hate the autocrat of Condor City."

"So I do!"

"An old grudge, eh?"

Silver Sybil colored, but did not answer.

"Ha! I see!—an old hurt!" exclaimed Nick.

The woman's eyes suddenly flashed and her body leaned across the table.

"A hurt that will never be healed!" she hissed. "The web caught a fly to-night. Ha! that is something you do not know, Nick Norway."

The Colorado showed his astonishment in his look.

"I have just reached Condor City. I know nothing. Tell me," he said.

Silver Sybil did not speak again until she had looked the man over.

She wanted to decide whether she could trust him.

"Bradd Brownell has just finished a play which he has had on hand a long time," she said at last. "The death of Lasso Pete and the cunning of Buzzard Belt have given him the trick. He has taken the girl to the den on the rise."

"The girl?" echoed Nick.

"Leone!" was the response. "The girl who lived with Lasso Pete. I never saw such an infamous plot. The very man to whom Leone should have looked for protection has thrown her into the nabob's snare. They're all alike here, Nicholas Norway! Condor City is a camp of tigers and thieves!"

"That's not a good send-off for me," grinned Nick.

"It is true!" continued Sybil. "I intended to save the girl. I went and appealed to Buzzard Belt, but got no satisfaction. Then I denounced him to his face, and came back here to find that Leone had gone to the house of mystery."

"When did this occur?"

"Since sundown."

"And she is there now?"

"Yes."

Nick was silent for a moment.

"I saw Leone last night," he remarked. "I happened to look into a certain cabin, and I saw her watching over a dead man."

"That was Lasso Pete!" cried Sybil.

"Her father?"

"No; Lasso Pete was a mountain tough. It could never be that his blood coursed through Leone's veins."

"Then who is Leone?"

"A girl with the bluest blood that ever gave anybody life!" was the quick response. "I don't wonder that Bradd Brownell set his trap for her. He could not win while Lasso Pete lived, for the old fellow hated and despised him, yet something seemed to link him to Condor City. He might have taken Leone away, but he would not stir from here. Now she has accepted the Grandee's offer of a home, and because Buzzard Belt, betraying his trust, told her to go. It is infamous. You dare not stand by me, Nick Norway."

"What would you do?" asked Nick.

"I'd demand the girl."

"On what grounds?"

"I would threaten Bradd Brownell with a vengeance that haunts him like his shadow."

"Then you know something?"

"Don't I?" and Sybil's eyes sparkled. "What do you say?"

Nick drew back.

"I did not come hither for any fuss," he said. "I have no desire to engage the king of Condor City. You will therefore excuse me, Silver Sybil."

"I thought so!" cried the woman. "I presume you are on a tour of some kind that will not let you show the manhood you should possess. The Prince of Bismarck used to be accounted brave. Well, I see he has cut his claws," and Sybil looked at the man with an expression of lofty contempt.

"It won't do," mentally ejaculated Nick. "I can't afford to league myself with this woman against the old cap'n. Diamond Dart and I have a little game of our own. I'll freeze to him, and let Sybil and the girl, Leone, go to Styx!"

The Colorado sport seemed to believe that the interview had reached its end for he left his chair and threw a glance toward the door.

Silver Sybil showed no disposition to detain him. She seemed anxious to be rid of his presence.

"Good-night, Sybil," said Nick. "I'm sorry we can't agree, but our interests don't seem to run in the same channel."

Before the woman could reply some one on the outside opened the door.

Sybil turned toward the unexpected caller and met him with evident displeasure.

Nicholas Norway could not see the person for the door held open was between them.

"I want to say that there is to be no interference with Leone by you," Sybil's visitor said. The voice made Nick start.

"In Jupiter's name, when did that man come to camp?" he exclaimed. "I haven't heard him talk for a long time, but I'd know him in the dark."

"It is too late! The infamy has been consummated!" cried Sybil, facing the man in the door.

"Yes. Leone is mistress of the golden palace," was the reply, and the voice was full of triumph. "You'll think different of me by and by, Sybil," continued the man, laughing.

"I'll always know you for a traitor, for Bradd Brownell's tool!" was the answer. "Here! let me introduce you to a new arrival. Ha! you did not know I had a visitor!"

The next moment the man at the door stepped into the house, and found himself face to face with the Prince of Bismarck.

"This is Nicholas Norway," continued Sybil. "And this, Mr. Norway, is Buzzard Belt, sport of Condor City."

In an instant there appeared a twinkle in Buzzard Belt's eyes as if he recognized the man he confronted.

Nick Norway lost color.

"This is most unfortunate," he muttered. "I don't want to meet this shadower here."

"I'm glad to see you, Mr. Norway," suddenly exclaimed Buzzard Belt. "Is your call on Sybil at an end?"

"It is."

"Then will you walk with me?"

A firm closing of Nick's lips bespoke a sudden resolution, and the next moment the two men were gone.

"They have met before!" cried Silver Sybil. "If they are not enemies they are not pards. Well, neither will help me against Bradd Brownell."

Already the two men were some distance from the cabin walking side by side through the starlight.

Nick was eying his companion like a hawk.

"You gave me the slip nicely in Colorado," suddenly said Buzzard Belt.

"I?" cried Nick, feigning astonishment.

"Oh! no smart games!" exclaimed the Condor City sport. "You know me as well as I know you. I am Crimson Claude, the California Sleuth, and you are Nick Norway, Bradd Brownell's accomplice in the great Denver robbery. There! keep your hand where it is! If you lift it I will drop you in your boots!"

The eyes of the speaker were fastened on the Prince of Bismarck, and Nick said nothing in reply.

CHAPTER X.

A MONTE CRISTO AT HOME.

WHILE Nicholas Norway is being startled by the man who has proclaimed himself Crimson Claude, let us cross the threshold of Condor City's palace of mystery.

We know that Leone has obeyed the commands of Buzzard Belt, and as it is our duty to follow the beautiful daughter of the gold-camp, we are compelled to convey the reader into Bradd Brownell's home.

It is a short time after Leone's departure from Silver Sybil's cabin, and the Gold Grandee is the only occupant of a room elegantly finished and richly carpeted.

"It was no trouble at all!" he exclaims. "The girl dropped into the web without any work though I thought last night she might give me trouble. Now, if I had the paper Lasso Pete left for Buzzard Belt I'd be completely fixed out. I'll see about that, though."

Leaning toward the nearest wall from the chair which he occupied Bradd Brownell jerked

a green cord twice and a minute later Shadow Simon stood before him.

"Monte!" said the grandee sententiously barely glancing at his servant and Simon disappeared.

In a little while the door opened again and a tall, agile man in dark shirt, with pantaloons thrust into his boot tops, confronted Bradd.

"Here, Monte!" exclaimed the Grandee.

The man advanced and halted at the table where he stood with folded arms like a person awaiting orders.

"I want some information of a peculiar kind," continued Bradd looking up into the dark and handsome face of his follower.

"Well, captain?"

"I want a certain paper which last night passed into the hand of Buzzard Belt."

"Only a paper, captain?"

"Yes."

"I guess it shall become yours."

"If you say so it will!" was the answer. "I can not say whether Buzzard Belt has concealed it about his cabin, or whether he keeps it on his person. You will find it, Monte. You will bring it to me, of course unopened."

The bronze servant bowed, and then his eyes glistened meaningly.

"The man may resist, captain?" his lips said.

"So much the better. I have confidence in you, Monte," was the quick retort.

The tall fellow bowed again as if he understood the meaning of the two sentences.

"You will obtain this paper as soon as possible, I prefer that you get it peaceably, but I must have it."

"Did I ever fail you, captain?"

"Never!"

Monte was about to turn away when Bradd Brownell leaned forward.

"The palace is likely to have a queen, Monte," he said.

The man gave the Grandee an inquisitive stare.

"Then you have won—"

Monte stopped short as if Bradd's eyes had checked him.

"Yes, I think I have won *her*," laughed the gold king.

"I've wondered why you didn't make the play long ago," said Monte. "When she first came here I thought she'd do for queen o' this palace. Silver Sybil is beautiful—"

"Silver Sybil?" roared Bradd, flushing. "Who in Satan's name has mentioned that witch?"

Monte seemed deprived of his breath.

He tried to speak, but the effort was a stammer which increased his confusion.

"I wouldn't help make that woman queen of a gulch camp, let alone this palace!" exclaimed the gold-bug.

Monte begged his pardon in some blundering words at the end of which Bradd Brownell broke into a laugh.

"Never mind! Sybil can keep her cabin!" he exclaimed. "The fairy who is to be queen of this ophir of ours will grace it splendidly. She is in the palace now."

Monte looked around as if he expected to see the new queen at that moment in the room, and Bradd followed his glance with a smile.

"I'll present you to her by and by," he remarked. "What made you think I'd make Sybil queen of the realm?"

"I did not think of any other woman at the time."

"Just as if no other existed! ha, ha!" laughed Bradd. "How goes the work below, Monte?"

"All right."

"Does the new vein hold out?"

"Yes."

"What about Dakota's discovery?"

"It will not yield."

"I thought so. The fellow is somewhat visionary. I wish I had never taken him."

Monte made no reply.

"You want to put an end to the songs down below. Simon says they can be heard in a certain part of the camp."

The bronze sport instantly knitted his brows, whether at the command or the mention of Simon's name Bradd did not know.

"Is that all, captain?" Monte asked.

"Yes. Remember! I want the paper that Buzzard Belt holds."

"I'll not forget."

With a rude half-military salute with a dark hand Monte took his departure, leaving the Gold Grandee the only occupant of the room once more.

"Maybe it was natural that he should pick on Silver Sybil for Queen of the Shasta Ophir!" exclaimed the nabob. "By Jupiter! I'd sooner take a viper to my bosom, though she is very beautiful and has wonderful eyes. He never thought of Leone, though he has seen her a thousand times. I can forgive you the mistake, Monte, for you are my right bower; but if one of the underlings had made it, by heavens! I would have killed him in his boots!"

A minute later the Gold Grandee left the chair and crossed the room in three long strides.

Lifting a hand he touched a dark button on the wall and pressed it firmly, then stepped back and waited with his eyes fixed on the door through which Monte had disappeared.

When it opened Shadow Simon appeared, bearing a tray containing two bottles and a goblet, which he placed on the table and stood still, waiting for orders.

"What do you think of the queen, Simon?" suddenly asked Bradd.

"Lasso Pete's girl?"

"Leone!" said the nabob, with a frown, as if the name of the dead miner was distasteful to him. "She is not Lasso Pete's girl. She is from this hour Queen of the California Ophir. Isn't she a beauty, Simon?"

The man's eyes sparkled.

"I always thought she was a daisy, captain!" he exclaimed.

"What do you think Monte thought?"

Shadow Simon shook his head.

"The only 'queen' he could think of when I mentioned the matter was Silver Sybil."

"The deuce!" exclaimed Simon, and Bradd's keen eyes noticed a shiver of aversion. "I'd sooner take a rattler in than that woman."

"Right you are, Simon! By Jove! you shall drink with me for that opinion," and the gold king produced a goblet from a secret sideboard in the wall.

"By the way," he went on, as he poured the wine that sparkled in the lamplight, "what do you think keeps Sybil in Condor City?"

Shadow Simon, who saw only the rich liquid for which his mouth was watering, did not hear. Bradd Brownell bit his lips and repeated the question in a louder tone.

"I never thought of it at all, captain," answered Simon.

"She knows nothing about the bonanza, eh, Simon?"

"Nothing."

"Still she stays here?"

"I see she does."

"Didn't you tell me once that you saw a woman near the palace?"

"Yes."

"Was it Sybil?"

"I don't know."

"Leone, eh?"

Simon shook his head, with his eyes on the goblet which Bradd had filled.

"You know that we want no spies at all here," the gold-bug went on. "From this moment I want the strictest kind of a watch kept. If our secret should get out, the palace might go to the dogs. The man who was here last night—the fellow who had full possession of the library when I came home—I don't want anybody of his sort here. I have already given you your orders on that subject. Here, Simon, wet your whistle with this. A health to the future queen of the gold palace!"

Eager to empty the goblet which he knew was filled with a wine which had no superior in California, Shadow Simon hardly waited for his master to conclude.

He threw back his head and gulped it down.

"That'd make an old man young," he exclaimed, as the wine threw a sparkle into his eyes, and then he waited for another glass, which he did not get.

"See here! You will go out and see what the black-eyed viper is up to," suddenly resumed Bradd. "I took Leone from her cabin, and when she was not at home. She may say something in a passion, or attempt some little play which can be left out of the game. You understand, Simon?"

The servant bowed.

"I have tolerated Silver Sybil's presence here because I don't like to quarrel with a woman," the Grandee went on. "I confess to you that I don't like her. And since Monte, the fool, thought of her as the future queen of the palace I hate her more than ever. See what she is up to. I have given Monte certain orders, but his work won't clash with yours, Simon. That is all."

When Shadow Simon had taken his departure, Bradd Brownell helped himself to another glass of wine, and then retired to an adjoining room where the pressing of a secret spring opened a sliding door in the wall.

For several minutes the gold-bug of Condor City listened at the opening, hearing the voices of men and the ring of stone and steel as they came up from below.

The sounds seemed to delight him, for a smile came to his lips, and he appeared reluctant to quit the spot.

"There's not another one like it on the globe!" he ejaculated. "I am the richest man in boots, and a few years ago I couldn't buy a meal in flush Frisco. But a ten-strike made it. One excellent play put me on my pins, and I hold the secret for which more than one poor wretch yielded up his life. And the best thing about it all is that I have completely baffled the sleuth-bounds. Of course the Denver nabob has disappeared—Nick said so last night—and the Colorado or California spotter he was going to put on my track has thrown up the sponge. There isn't a luckier man on the sod than Bradd Brownell. Woe to the person who is foolish enough to play against me!"

He shut the panel and stepped back, with triumph looking from the windows of his brilliant black eyes.

"I'll go and see the beauty of Shasta!" he ex-

claimed. "Lasso Pete was a long while shuffling off, but he finished at last!"

Not long afterward the Shasta gold king entered a room magnificently furnished, and caught sight of a young girl, who rose from a velvet divan at his appearance.

It was Leone.

She came toward him with a smile, as if she was pleased with her new quarters.

"What a palace you have here!" exclaimed the girl, with the voice of an enthusiast. "I wonder what possessed you to build it here in the shadow of Shasta? Was there no other place for it?"

"Not for this palace," ejaculated Bradd, in tones full of emphasis. "By and by you will know, Leone, that I have builded in the right place."

The girl made no reply; her eyes drooped, and a thought flashed across her mind.

"I came here for a secret, and I will have nothing less!" she murmured.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BLACK-EYED VIPER.

"If you wish, I will show you some of the beauties of the palace," suddenly resumed Bradd Brownell, after a short silence.

Leone's eyes instantly lit up with eagerness, but the light was not intense enough to betray her.

"Condor City has always looked upon your house as a curiosity," she replied.

"And you, Leone?"

"I never knew what to think of it," smiled the girl.

"Let me show you, then," was the response, and Leone was shown first into an adjoining room, furnished as sumptuously as any she had yet seen.

From room to room the Gold Grandee led her, drawing from her constant expressions of astonishment.

Many of these were genuine, while others were sent out for the purpose of deceiving the gold-bug, and Leone several times wondered whether she was successful.

"What would he say if he knew that I came here under instructions from Buzzard Belt?" she mentally exclaimed. "Ay, what would my life be worth if he knew that I am here to find out all about him and the secret he is supposed to guard?"

She felt the blood leaving her cheek at these thoughts.

"Buzzard Belt says it is all to right one of the most infamous wrongs ever perpetrated," she went on in the same manner. "He has convinced me that he speaks the truth. I will do my part, or perish in the palace of mystery."

At last Bradd Brownell opened the door of a certain room and turned to Leone with a smile.

"This is the gold-room," he exclaimed.

At first the girl saw nothing, for the light in the room was dim; but in a little while she distinguished a number of heavy shelves laden with a great many canvas bags, all of the same size, and side by side.

As the young girl leaned forward to take in the whole interior of the apartment, which was not very large, she caught sight of a man who stood like a statue beside the shelves.

Bradd Brownell seemed to see him at the same moment.

Leone saw that the fellow was large and muscular, with a dark face and giant arms.

"That is Raven Ralph. I have seen him a thousand times in Condor!" passed through her mind.

The man did not move.

"You saw the statue in there?" smiled Bradd, as he closed the door.

Leone looked astonished.

"I keep it there all the time," he continued.

"A thief would see it and turn back, believing it a living man," and the nabob of Shasta ended with a light laugh.

Leone, however, was not to be deceived.

She knew that the figure in the gold-room was a living man. She had recognized him as Raven Ralph, a miner whom she had seen at intervals in the camp.

One of Bradd's tools had been spotted, and Leone felt that one point had been gained.

"What think you of the palace?" asked the Gold Grandee when he had brought the girl back to the apartment from which they had set out on the inspection.

"It is grand!" cried the girl, enthusiastically.

"Grandier than your dreams, eh?"

"Yes."

"I thought so! It is your home, and there is not another like it on the continent. You have not seen all yet, Leone. There is something yet unrevealed, but you shall see it by and by. Good-night. If you are a bird in a cage, remember it is a golden one!" and leaving the girl no time to reply he left her alone.

Going back to his library Bradd Brownell found a man under the lamp.

"By Jove! I did not intend to be discovered!" exclaimed this man, his dark face relieved by a smile.

"And I did not intend to discover you!" was the response. "But I made the girl believe you were an automaton kept in the gold-room to

frighten burglars!" and Bradd Brownell laughed.

"Do you think she believed you?" the man asked anxiously.

"She did!"

"She knows me. She has seen me often in the city."

"Well, she didn't recognize you to-night."

"By Jove! I was afraid it was different. I heard you open the door and then I caught a glimpse of the girl. In an instant I became a statue, but, Jupiter! it was hard work to stand there without stirring, captain."

"You did admirably, Raven. I am satisfied."

The man bowed and vanished.

"I don't want her to see too much of my gold seraphs so soon," the Shasta nabob exclaimed. "Of course the fly is completely in the web, but I want to go slow for a reason. I want Monte's report first. I don't care so much about Simon's, although I don't like Silver Sybil and her black eyes."

The Shasta chief had hardly finished with himself when a bell tinkled musically overhead, and as he turned his eyes toward the door Shadow Simon came in.

It was evident that the man had made a discovery.

"You have discovered something," said Bradd fixing his eyes upon his servant.

"I have, and I think it's pretty good news, too."

"Well?"

"The black-eyed viper has skipped."

Bradd Brownell could not suppress an ejaculation of surprise.

Shadow Simon expected to see a gleam of satisfaction light up his eyes, but instead they got a troubled look.

"Sybil gone?" he cried.

"That is it."

"When did she go?"

"About an hour ago."

"How?"

"Horseback."

"She has no horse."

"She bought one."

"Of whom?"

"Rockaway Reese."

Simon thought he heard his chief's teeth meet over his last information.

Bradd was silent for a moment.

"Which trail did she take?" he suddenly asked.

"The southern one."

"Well, she's got to be followed."

This was startling information for Shadow Simon.

He thought Bradd would be glad to hear that Silver Sybil had left camp.

"You will take my horse and follow that woman, Simon."

Shadow Simon could not keep back a cry of aversion.

He did not want the job; that was evident.

"Why not let the black-eyed viper go?" he ventured. "Condor City is well rid of her."

The nabob's eyes seemed to flash with lightning fire.

"You will follow her!" he answered through his teeth. "Black Whirlwind will overtake Rockaway's horse though he is an animal of excellent bottom."

"If I overtake her, what?"

"There must be no 'ifs' in this chase. There must be a certain find. When you overtake her you must try to fetch her back. I think she will resist."

"I know it," ejaculated Simon with a shudder.

"Then you will prevent her from going on! Now, go to your duty, and bring me a satisfactory report."

The eyes of the two men happened to meet as Bradd Brownell gave utterance to the last words.

"I think you understand me, Simon," the nabob added.

Shadow Simon inclined his head.

Yes, he understood the man before him. He had served him too long to grope after the meaning of his words.

Remember, if the viper tries to sting you, Simon, you are to apply the only remedy that baffles such attempts," he ejaculated as Shadow Simon crossed the room.

"That is a dangerous woman, and it is not for the good of the bonanza that she rides from Condor City at this hour."

"Don't I know what he means?" muttered the man who went out into the brilliant starlight from the soft glow of the gold king's lamps. "I am to follow Silver Sybil, but I am not to bring her back to Condor. That is it just as plainly as if he said the words. I am to leave her with her ride unfinished, somewhere in the mountains for the wolf and the buzzard. He has told me before that he hates her; but that is not all. He fears her, too!"

Talking thus to himself Shadow Simon went to a building where he found a horse known to the gold camp as Black Whirlwind, Bradd Brownell's steed.

As if he hoped to overtake Sybil as speedily as possible he saddled the horse in a minute and led him out.

"One word before you go, Simon," spoke a

voice at the man's elbow as he prepared to throw himself into the saddle.

Bradd Brownell had followed him.

"You will follow Sybil to Frisco if you can't catch her this side," he went on. "If you cannot fetch her back you will bring me the gold charm she wears on her bosom. That will be report enough," and Simon was left alone to mount Black Whirlwind and depart.

At that moment a horse was carrying a female rider down the broadest trail that led from the Shasta gold camp.

She sat in the saddle like a born equestrienne and kept the steed in a smart canter as if she was in no particular hurry and did not fear pursuit.

Of course this woman was Silver Sybil making her way from Condor City where she had lived for many months.

If she had known that Shadow Simon was mounting Black Whirlwind for the chase, she might have given her new purchase the point of the silver spur she wore, but she could not see the scenes that were occurring behind her.

"There's a good deal of guess-work in this trip," Sybil ejaculated in audible tones knowing there were no listeners on that trail. "If I find him I will be doubly armed and the house of Brownell will crumble like a castle of cards. He was living in Yuba City when I last heard of him, but I will find him wherever he is. Let Leone go for the present. She went into the net of her own accord, but the spider will not wear the victory long. He will laugh when he hears that I have left Condor. He'll not take the trouble to send any of his slaves after me."

Sybil's eyes got bright, and she laughed at her new play as the horse carried her over the mountain trail.

At that very moment, Shadow Simon was riding south from Condor.

The black horse was glad to find himself beyond the precincts of the stall, and with head erect, he bore the gold-bug's servant rapidly over the trail.

Shadow Simon was armed as if he expected to encounter a lot of California brigands instead of one woman.

Besides the two revolvers he carried in his belt, he wore a long-bladed bowie in an ornamented sheath, and the top of the hilt was tipped with silver.

After awhile, Silver Sybil's horse threw back his pointed ears and listened.

"What is it?" asked the woman.

At the sound of her voice, the horse slackened his gait until it fell into a walk, when she turned in the saddle and listened with her steed.

"Somebody's behind me!" she exclaimed.

A moment later she drew to one side of the trail and halted against a tree whose thick foliage kept off the glimmer of the stars.

Then leaning forward, she placed one hand on the steed's nostrils, and with the other drew a revolver.

"Now, show yourself," she murmured, throwing a glance toward Condor City.

Silver Sybil did not have to wait long.

Nearer and nearer came the horse on the trail.

As it passed, Sybil uttered a cry:

"I might have known this. The man yonder kills for the Gold Grandee!"

CHAPTER XII.

A TRAGEDY.

"WELL, did you disilver anything?"

"I should reckon I did."

"Go on."

The first speaker was Diamond Dart, and his words were addressed to the man who entered his cabin awhile after Silver Sybil had ridden from Condor City.

Nicholas Norway had just come back, and if Diamond Dart had studied his face for a moment, he would have seen that he had made a discovery of some kind.

"I made a discovery that almost took my breath," said Nick, taking a stool and leaning against the table.

"It takes a good deal ter do thet, Nick, or it used ter durin' Eel River days," grinned Diamond Dart.

"It takes a powerful sight to do it now," was the reply. "In the first place, I found a woman who called me by one of my old names—the Prince o' Bismarck."

"That war Sybil for a thousand!"

"It was nobody, else and I found in her the Countess o' Colorado, a female what used ter stake her diamonds in the camps over thar a few years ago."

"But that war not ther diskivery thet made you gasp, Nick?"

"No. I ran against a man who's been livin' hyer a long time under a name that ain't his own by a thousand miles."

"Ho! is that all?" cried Diamond Dart.

"Why I'm doin' thet myself you know."

"Yes. But I've found a man whose sudden disappearance has puzzled more'n half o' Californy. I've discovered Crimson Claude. Ever hear o' him, Diamond?"

Diamond Dart started visibly.

"I should say you have!" ejaculated Nick. "The Californy Sleuth who used to have such

a reputation for closin' in on fellows is in Condor. He's been hyer for months."

"As whom?"

"As Buzzard Belt."

"Say, didn't he find you instead o' you him, Nick?" asked the Condor City miner with a wide grin.

"Confound it, yes."

"Well, what happened?"

"I was in Sybil's shanty when he came thar ter say that she shouldn't interfere with Leone's movements. He would hev gone away, without seein' me if Sybil hadn't called his attention to my presence. I knew him first by his voice and when he got his eyes on me I knew he would call me by my right name. He asked me ter take a walk with him, an' I knew better than to refuse. All at once in the starlight just when I war thinkin' about gettin' the drop on him, he whirled an' said: 'What did you get for cuttin' the telegraph wires at Buzz Saw, anyhow, Nick?' Thet settled the hull business. It war no uselyin' after thet."

"An' you told him?" queried Diamond Dart. "I said I guessed he ought ter know by this time, and he looked at me and smiled. We went down to his cabin after that; his eyes were on me all the time and I got no chance. In his shanty, with the door shut, he told me that he war still on the trail o' the man who fleeced Gold Dresden, the Denver nabob. He has never left it since Dresden put him on it the day after the fleecin'."

"That was a long time ago!" ejaculated Diamond Dart.

"Yes. He didn't expect ter find me in Condor, but his net is set for all kinds of fish," Nick went on. "He's been playin' Buzzard Belt hyer for months. You can guess why, Diamond."

"Because thar's a gold palace out thar on a hill!" exclaimed the Shasta sport.

"That is it. Crimson Claude knows that Bradd Brownell made his first raise in Denver. He has tracked him all over the big Wild West. Now he would lose the trail and now find it again. Bradd has never seen him, consequently he could not know that Buzzard Belt was Crimson Claude, the California Sleuth. He has inhabited his little cabin, keepin' his keen eyes on the gold palace, an' watchin' the comings an' goings of its owner."

"Why did he hold back?" asked Diamond Dart.

"He keeps that to himself," was the reply.

"They serve no warrants in this part o' the world. We have no law in the Shasta kentry."

"Only the law of might, eh, Diamond?"

"That is all, an' Heaven knows that one man can't take Bradd Brownell from Condor City."

"If one man can do it I have just left him!" exclaimed Nick Norway. "Crimson Claude knows that Gold Dresden can never pay him one dollar for his work. He knows, too, that he can get thousands a year for playin' ferret elsewhere, but he clings like death to a trail that may net him only death!"

"I like a man like that!" cried Diamond Dart, in tones of admiration.

"I'd like him, too, if he hadn't laid his hand on my shoulder when he talked an' said with his eyes: 'One move against me, Nicholas, an' I'll end your career.'"

"That is self-defense," ejaculated the Condor City sport. "After all, he let you go?"

"With a solemn promise. I had ter give it, Diamond."

"An' it war—"

"That I'd quit Condor inside of an hour."

"I don't like that. It interferes with our game."

"I promised to meet him at the cabin before I went away," finished Nick.

"I war just layin' some plans how ter get at ther Grandee's secret," said Diamond Dart.

"Now you ar' goin' away."

"Let me play my hand out!" exclaimed Nick.

"By Jehu! thar's more than one way to outwit the man who always has a trap set."

"Then you ar' goin' ter show Crimson Claude a new hand?"

"If I don't may grass never grow whar I sleep!" was the answer. "I could go on the hill and sell my discovery for a cool ten or twenty thousand—for fifty thousand, may be—for what is money to Bradd Brownell who wants to keep out o' the clutches of the California Sleuth? I told the ferret that I might give him away ter Bradd but he laughed an' said he guessed I wouldn't. But my hour's about up, Diamond," and Nick sprung from the stool and walked toward the door.

"What are you going to do?" asked Diamond Dart, eying him closely.

"I shall probably play an Eel River 'hand,' ha, ha!" was the answer.

"Be careful. You're dealin' with no infant."

"No! with a giant! I know him. The pitcher goes once too often to the well, Diamond, so does the ferret find his fatal Norway," and with a laugh for his pun, Nick threw wide the door and disappeared.

"I consider myself pretty sharp, but I never thought Buzzard Belt was anybody important," muttered Diamond Dart over the situation. "I once had a little job on hands that kept him on the lookout for me a few days, but it was nothin' like the crime for which he has shadowed Bradd Brownell. I've known Nicholas to make some cool plays, but he never pitted himself against a man like Crimson Claude."

Meanwhile Nick Norway was walking toward Buzzard Belt's cabin.

As he had informed Diamond Dart his hour of grace had about expired, and he expected to find the California ferret awaitin' his return.

Silver Sybil had left Condor City on a mission destined to invest another part of our romance with a thrilling interest, but he knew it not.

He was even anxious to find Crimson Claude, for he had perfected a scheme which he believed could not fail.

The distance between the two cabins was not great, but as Nicholas was not accustomed to Condor City he was rather slow to find Claude's.

"It wouldn't do to run into the wrong roost!" he ejaculated as he moved along. "These rascally shanties are all alike, an' thar's a light in more than one. May be I'd better peep inter several along hyer till I find Crimson Claude's." And he drew up to the nearest one on his right and began to carry out the suggestion.

The first cabin showed him nothing. In the next a man was asleep on a cot, while another was mending a garment at a rough table.

"Nothin' thus far," murmured Nick.

He was about to treat the third shanty to a similar visit when the door opened and a man came out.

Fortunately for Nick he was in the shadow of the cabin, and the man did not catch a glimpse of him.

"The chap is masked!" cried the Prince of Bismarck, noticing the dark cloth that concealed the man's face. "Something is going to be done besides my play."

Nick watched the masked man who moved off in front of the little cabins, and all at once, as if impressed with the importance of his mission, he glided after him with a hand on the butt of one of his revolvers.

All at once the masked man slackened his gait, and Nick saw him approach the lighted window of a shanty and lean forward like a true prowler of the night.

"Ah! that is Crimson Claude's shanty!" passed through Norway's mind. "What does the fellow want thar?"

The next moment the masked man moved from the window to the door. Nick heard the latch click under the pressure of his hand, and as he pushed the portal wide he (Nick) sprung to the window.

These last movements did not occupy five seconds, and the Prince of Bismarck saw the wearer of the mask rouse a man who had been sitting near a table.

"Don't jump out o' yer boots, Buzzard Belt!" cried the stranger to the man who stood before his leveled revolver. "I'm hyer on a little business an' I won't keep you afore my dropper long."

There was a flash of mingled fearlessness and defiance in Buzzard Belt's dark eyes as they looked the mask over from head to foot.

"Well, robber, what is it?" he said, through his teeth.

"Ha, ha! robber is it?" laughed the hidden face. "Mebbe you're right, Buzzard Belt! I want what Lasso Pete left for you."

There was no answer.

"I want the paper you got from Leone when you came back after Pete's death!" continued the night-hawk. "You will save time and trouble by bandin' it over at once."

Nicholas Norway, in his eagerness to see everything, glued his face to the little window.

"If the masked chap touches the trigger it releases me!" he said to himself. "As a matter o' course I won't interfere, Crimson Claude."

As for the California Sleuth his figure seemed to get new development at the threat.

"He's goin' to hold it!" ejaculated Nick, catching the light of his eyes.

"One minute, no more!" came over the leveled revolver. "This is a game that forces me to play my best hand at the start. Don't look into the muzzle of my peacemaker an' say you haven't the document, Buzzard Belt. Allow the best shot in Shasta to count five while you produce the paper." And the man began "One—two," with an interval between.

All at once, at the sound of the third numeral, Buzzard Belt went forward with a suddenness that almost lifted the single spectator off his feet.

It was a leap at the revolver's muzzle, the bound of a tiger at the deadly rifles that cover him!

At the same moment up went the ferret's arm, and then two men came writhing out of the cabin, just missing the breathless Nick at the door.

The Prince of Bismarck drew back. It was not his fight, but yet he might profit by it.

Suddenly the two men separated, as if one had thrown the other from him, and then the sharp report of a revolver awoke the echoes of the night.

One of the men wheeled and dropped on his face!

CHAPTER XIII.

AFTER THE SHOT.

HUGGING the cabin close, where the wall was dark beside the window, Nicholas Norway had seen the tragic termination of the scuffle for the mastery.

His position was not a pleasant one, and he wished to avoid the gaze of the victor, who stood a few feet away with a smoking pistol in his hand.

The man in the mask was the one who had fallen at the shot; the other, Buzzard Belt, had come out of the melee unscathed.

When the first shock of the shot had died away, Nick saw the Condor City sport walk toward his foe.

"Now is my time. What a chance!" suddenly ejaculated Nick, and his hand flew to one of his revolvers. "No, by Jupiter! I would be hunted for the killing of two men," he reflected. "Condor City will try him for the shootin' of one, and I may get in a statement that will fasten the knot under the Sleuth's ear."

Nick held back while Buzzard Belt stooped over the stalwart figure lying in the starlight.

He saw his hand lift the mask that still adhered to his face, and then he heard a startling exclamation.

"Gods! it is Monte!" cried Buzzard Belt. "I'll bet a thousand he came from the golden web of the Shasta spider!"

The mask fell back upon the face, and Buzzard Belt came toward the cabin.

Fortunately for Nick, the front logs were in shadow and he was not seen.

"It was in self-defense," he heard Buzzard Belt say aloud. "The man came hither to rob me; even now there is a six-shooter clutched in his hand."

At that moment Nick heard a confusion of footsteps and voices, and he slipped around the cabin unperceived.

"If they had come a little sooner!" he exclaimed. "But they will be on hand soon enough I'm thinking. Crimson Claude has built his own death-trap."

"Hyer's ther man what got it!" cried a loud rough voice as three men halted by the man on the ground, and Nick held his breath till he heard all three recognize the dead as Monte.

"He brought it upon himself, gentlemen," was the answer from the cabin door, and the figure of Buzzard Belt came forward. "He came to the shanty, covered me with a dropper, and made a demand I would not listen to."

"Ho! you did it, then?" cried one of the three.

"Yes."

"Who saw it all?"

"That man," answered Buzzard Belt, pointing to the dead. "You see he stili wears the robber's sign—the mask?"

"But it is Monte!"

"I discovered it after the shot."

A short silence followed.

"What was his demand?"

"He wanted a bit of property which I have a right to keep."

"Dust?"

"No."

The three men glanced from Buzzard Belt into each other's faces.

More than once a startling revelation was on Nick's tongue, but he held it back.

Condor City did not know that Buzzard Belt was Crimson Claude, the California Sleuth.

He itched to go forward and confront the spotter with his true name, to tell the pards of Condor that the man who had sent Monte to his eternal account was one of those trained dogs hated by every gold camp in the Wild West.

"Never mind! the time will come for it," said Nick, holding back. "I've got the call on this smart shadow who wants to banish me from Condor?"

"You know what must follow this trouble," one of the three said, abruptly, to Buzzard Belt. "Certainly; there must be a trial. I am ready."

"Whar ar' your witnesses?"

"We'll attend to that when the time comes," he answered, mysteriously. "You can consider me under arrest for the killing of Monte. There is no danger of my running away. You will find me here," and he turned and walked back to the cabin as coolly as if he was not to be put on trial for his life.

"He's got no witnesses!" ejaculated Nick, as he glided off after the three men had departed to spread the news of the tragedy. "I am the only spectator, and he doesn't know it. I'll get my evidence in in a manner that'll give the verdict for Condor, for with Crimson Claude in the game, Diamond Dart and I will lose our little play."

In less than half an hour after the sudden ending of a life the whole camp knew that Buzzard Belt had the blood of Monte on his hands.

There was no cabin much larger than its neighbors and the citizens of Condor collected on the largest piece of unoccupied ground in camp.

Every cabin had depleted itself and a number of lights revealed the entire proceedings.

On a blanket placed on the hard ground lay the body of the man who had played his last act for Bradd Brownell.

Somebody had taken the mask away and the death-struck but handsome face of the stalwart tough had nothing between it and the stars.

We have said that Bradd Brownell virtually owned the men of the mountain camp.

This was apparent in the muttered expressions and the glances thrown toward a man who stood erect with folded arms a few feet from the corpse on the blanket.

The crowd was waiting for some one for there were frequent looks toward a certain part of the camp.

"Hyer he is!" ejaculated a dozen men at once, and the following moment the man expected for some time stepped into the light.

It was Bradd Brownell!

The Gold Grandee had made his appearance in a suit of elegant clothes which gave him an impressive look.

Under the broad brim of the handsome hat he wore burned two eyes that seemed eager to alight on a certain person and destroy him with a look.

The gold-bug stepped forward amid almost breathless silence, followed by the looks of the bronze crowd.

He did not halt until he reached the man on the blanket. His lips seemed to meet madly when he looked down into the face of Monte.

"My man has failed!" he mentally exclaimed. "Instead of getting the paper I want, he got his death! He must have found his man on guard. I presume I will find him in the same attitude; but I don't think I will fail as Monte has!"

All at once he turned from the corpse and commenced to look for Buzzard Belt.

The task did not occupy half a minute for the most conspicuous figure in the light was the man with folded arms, and a quiet countenance.

"They say you did it!" spoke Bradd Brownell moving toward Buzzard Belt as if some impulse had moved him.

"That is true."

"What is your plea?"

"I was to be robbed," was the answer.

"By Monte?"

"By Monte!"

"He had no use for money."

"He didn't want any."

The prisoner's willingness to answer seemed to perplex the inquisitor.

"They've said that Monte wore a mask. I don't see it," he exclaimed, turning suddenly from Buzzard Belt to the crowd.

"It has been taken off," said the California Sleuth.

A smile came to the corners of Bradd's lips.

"I think the production of the mask necessary to prove that Monte came to your shanty to play road-agent," he ejaculated turning again upon the prisoner.

"Who saw the trouble?"

"The dead man there."

"And you claim to have fought for your own?"

"For my property and my life."

"We will hear the whole case to-morrow—in the morning at nine."

"I am ready now."

"But Condor City is not!" spoke the Grandee meaningly. "We will try this case under the laws of Condor. A life has been taken and the slayer bestows upon the dead an epithet which insults us all whose pard he was if it be true. Take the body to Monte's cabin. The prisoner will remain, will he not?"

The gold king hardly glanced at Buzzard Belt as he finished.

"I will be here!" was the clear reply. "When you call your court to order you will find the prisoner on deck!"

Bradd Brownell went back to the palace on the hill.

"What has taken place in Condor City?" suddenly asked a silvery voice, and the nabob found himself confronted by a young girl who opened the door of the room he occupied almost before he had composed himself.

"How do you know anything has happened?" he asked with a smile.

"I have seen a crowd on the square and it is all lit up. Something has taken place."

In an instant the Grandee's countenance changed.

"A life has been taken," he said.

Leone started and then came forward with the color leaving her face.

Did she suspect that Buzzard Belt was in some way connected with the event mentioned by Bradd Brownell?

He seemed to enjoy her fear.

"Your new friend has been moving a little fast!" suddenly laughed the gold spider.

"Sit down, Leone. The chair is at your side. I'm afraid he has worked himself into a bad trap."

By this time the girl was white and breathless. She had but one friend in Condor City, and that one was Buzzard Belt, the man who had sent her to the house of mystery and fate.

"Tell me!" she exclaimed. "You have just come from the plaza."

"Well, Monte is dead."

"Monte?" echoed Leone.

"You did not know him. I forgot!" cried

Bradd. "He was one of the best men I—" he caught himself and paused, "one of the best I ever knew," he added. "Buzzard Belt shot him dead in his boots awhile ago. That is what the lighted plaza meant."

Leone could not suppress a cry.

"The slayer is to be tried to-morrow," Bradd went on. "Of course the man will get as fair a hearing as he deserves. Ha! where are you going?" and the Grandee started up as Leone left her chair and moved toward the door.

"You forget that Buzzard Belt is my nearest friend since Lasso Pete died," she exclaimed.

"But you can't help him now," was the answer. "Besides, he doesn't want you near him."

Already the nabob's hand had caught Leone's arm in a gentle yet firm grip, and the two were looking into each other's face as if they were trying to read the thoughts that were at work.

"My part of the game ends if they sentence him, and they will!" passed through Leone's mind, and then she met the Grandee's look with words:

"Condor City won't give him a fair trial!" she cried.

"As fair as he deserves, I've said," was the retort.

"You won't put a hand between the prisoner and the court."

"Why should I? The man he killed was Monte, my friend."

Leone started back the length of his arm, and then, with a sudden effort, wrenched herself loose.

"Not to-night, Leone!" he flashed, bounding forward and planting himself between her and the door, with his figure drawn to its true height and his brilliant eyes in a blaze. "You forget that this is your home, and also that I am the lord of the golden ophir. We don't want women to appear in the drama now being played in Condor. The laws of Shasta are inexorable. The shedder of blood shall die by the hands of his fellow-man. Let to-morrow take care of itself!"

The beautiful girl, with eyes fixed upon him, staggered back with a moan.

The meshes of fate were about her!

CHAPTER XIV.

TOO EAGER BY HALF.

A FEW minutes after his unexpected and somewhat thrilling interview with Leone, Bradd Brownell was alone once more.

"I am going to be master here!" he exclaimed. "Other men can rule elsewhere, but here—in Condor City—I am king! The fellow who wants to put himself between me and success has fallen into a trap of his own making. Some-how-or-other Monte failed to get the papers; he holds them still if he hasn't destroyed them since, which is not likely. To-morrow will witness the last earthly move by Buzzard Belt, the last man who would oppose me. Diamond Dart is nobody. I can buy his dirt heap when I want it, or get it another way."

So the Gold Grandee resolved to keep his authority in Condor City.

"The girl wanted to go back to him, ha, ha!" he laughed. "She has found out that when she came here she came to remain till I open the doors of the gold cage. Not just yet, my Shasta song-bird!"

Meantime down in the heart of the gold camp Buzzard Belt had gone back to his cabin.

There was a gleam in his eyes which no one got to see.

"I wonder if I didn't frighten Nick Norway out of camp?" thought he. "The fellow was to have come back and let me conduct him from Condor City, but he has not showed up. Maybe the trouble with Monte interfered and gave him an additional terror. Monte wanted Lasso Pete's paper—for his mother. I know you, Bradd Brownell!" And the California Sleuth glanced in the direction of the house that crowned the hill.

"Monte came straight from you, Bradd," Crimson Claude went on. "In Denver you did your work yourself, but here you send your right bower to pluck me. Monte held the drop a second too long. His eye and his hand lost their powers. I saw my time. It cost the sport his life in the end; but not until I lifted the mask did I know it was Monte."

The Western detective deplored the tragic turn affairs had taken.

He did not seek so startling an interruption of the game he was playing.

He had sent Leone to Bradd Brownell's golden web, and she was doubtless bending her energies to the work before her while he was on the eve of being tried for his life in a court composed of a lot of human tigers under the will of one above them all.

And a few hours only intervened between him and the ordeal!

The only man in Condor—if he still remained—who knew him for Crimson Claude, the Sleuth, was Nicholas Norway.

What had become of him?

Had he really left camp, or was he lingering around, anxious to witness the trial of the coming day?

"There is but one thing left me, and that is to

wait," thought Claude, when he met these mental interrogatives. "If I beat Condor for Nicholas I will be watched by the Grandee's tools, who might pounce upon the very man I want to find. There is danger in this. If found by Bradd's men, Nick Norway will not scruple to unmask me to his old chief."

The truth is that the Prince of Bismarck had witnessed from a safe distance the scene on the lighted plaza.

He had not fled the camp, for a, to him, very brilliant scheme had entered his head.

The California Sleuth was on the brink of doom. He was wholly in the power of the Gold Grandee unless he chose to run off before morning which Nick believed was furthest from his thoughts.

On the following day, as certain as it came, in Nick's mind, the spider in the golden web would add another triumph to his list.

And that would be the wiping out of the California Sleuth.

Instead of quitting Condor City under these circumstances, Nicholas Norway stole back to Diamond Dart's cabin, where he thrilled his old pard with a recital of the thrilling events which had just taken place.

The two men put their heads together and resolved to work out of the affair something glorious for both.

Diamond Dart, who had been to the bottom of the shaft beneath his shanty since Nick's departure, said that the underground picks were still at work, but that the singing had ceased entirely.

As the sounds came from the rise covered by the Grandee's palace, there was no doubt as to their meaning.

Bradd Brownell was working a bonanza of great wealth, and in a manner that gave him all the profits.

Diamond Dart had long believed that the several surface mines of Condor City were worked as a blind.

His examination of them had convinced him that they were not good property, yet a lot of men kept at them always under the Grandee's orders.

Bradd Brownell never left the golden palace more than a day at a time.

Was he afraid that the secret could not be trusted with Shadow Simon, Monte, and the other bronze slaves who worked to his whim?

Diamond Dart had not used his eyes and ears for nothing during his residence in Condor.

He knew that a palace would not rise above the cabins if something rich did not exist beneath it.

And he knew, too, that it would be worth his life to try to penetrate beyond the doors of the gold house, doors never made to open to him.

The two pards in the cabin—Nick and Diamond Dart—discussed more than one scheme as the minutes of that eventful night slipped away.

If they obtained the secret, what?

With Bradd Brownell and the pards of Condor against them they could do nothing.

The bonanza would still be the Gold Grandee's as surely as it was then.

"Why not sell him what I know?" suddenly exclaimed Nick.

"Sell him what?"

"The truth about Buzzard Belt."

"Pshaw! they're goin' to cut his wings to-morrow anyhow!" was the retort.

"But he doesn't know that he is Crimson Claude the Sleuth set on his trail by Gold Dresden, or Sir Harold Harcourt, in Denver. He'll give something for that!"

"Dare you go back to the palace after collecting usury? You swore to leave Condor. On your oath you promised Bradd Brownell to go away."

Nick seemed to choke, but the next moment a smile parted his lips.

"It mightn't be safe for me to go up," he remarked. "But you might go, Diamond."

"Not just now," grinned Diamond. "With everything in his hands he won't want to bargain for a secret which he will crush to-morrow anyway. I b'lieve he would give something for something definite about Sir Harold Harcourt as you call him; but for the secret you want to sell—nothing!"

"Maybe you're right," spoke Nick, meekly.

"But hang it all! I want to get even with Crimson Claude some way. I want to help him across the mystic river, for didn't he threaten to drop me in my boots—I, the Prince of Bismarck? Ho! I have it!" And Nick wheeled toward the little table at his elbow.

"Get me some paper!" he went on as Diamond Dart's face got an expression of anxiety.

Writing paper was a luxury in Condor City, and the miner was compelled to submit a substitute in a fly leaf from the only book he possessed.

Nicholas Norway fished from the dark depths of one of his pockets the stub of a pencil, and a moment later, bent over the table which was not the smoothest of desks, he was writing laboriously.

"What's the galoot up to now?" thought Diamond Dart, as he watched him closely.

"I think I can win with that," ejaculated Nick, looking up from his task at last, and then he pushed the paper toward his companion who leaned forward to read it.

Nick Norway had scrawled as follows on the yellow sheet:

"MY DEAR COLONEL:—

"The man who shot Monte in cold blood—remember, in cold blood!—is no more Buzzard Belt than I am. He is the man Gold Dresden put at your heels for the Denver business. He is Claude, the California Sleuth. This is straight goods, a yard wide, and warranted not to rip! ONE WHO KNOWS."

Nick's eyes showed how proud he was of his achievement, and he longed for Diamond Dart to reach the bottom of the warning, so eager was he to hear his opinion.

"What d'ye propose to do with it?" asked the Condor City sport, lifting his eyes slowly from the paper and fixing them on Nick's face.

There was disapproval in Diamond Dart's tones.

"I—I intend to get it into his hands," was the reply.

"How?"

"Put it at his door."

"And keep out o' the way yourself?"

"Yes."

"Which will cause Bradd to fix on me as the writer?" exclaimed Diamond Dart.

Nick looked astonished.

"Don't you see that all the rest of Condor belongs to him?" the sport went on. "If anybody else knew that Buzzard Belt is Crimson Claude, he'd go straight to the Grandee an' say so. Therefore, in his mind, that paper could come from nobody but me. Don't you see?"

The logic of this reasoning confounded Nick.

He reached forward and picked up the paper.

"That's one way with the paper if you want ter send it," said Diamond Dart.

"How is that?"

"Write 'Norway' or 'Nick' at the bottom, and then vamoose the ranch."

"I'm not ready for that," exclaimed Nick, drawing back. "I want to be hyer to-morrow, but I don't want the old captain to know it. Ah! I can fix it now!"

And pencil in hand, Nick bent once more over the table.

The next moment he had made a startling and very important addition to the warning, for when Diamond Dart inspected it again he saw, under the first signature, the initials "S. S."

"The black-eyed enchantress doesn't like him!" exclaimed Diamond Dart.

"And she hates Crimson Claude," was the response. "Bradd will see 'Silver Sybil' in the two S's as quickly as if I had written her name in full. This will do."

"Very well," replied the miner. "Try it if you like. I've seen several of your Eel River schemes turn out poorly. This is Shasta land, remember! Your scheme will add new interest to the events of to-morrow, but I don't see just how it's goin' to better our game. Try it, though."

"I shall!" cried Nick, as he left the table. "This paper will fall into Captain Bradd's hands in time to fasten the coils about the California Sleuth. After a while I can step in and reap my reward."

There was no answer and Diamond Dart saw Nick leave the cabin.

"Vengeance makes some men play fool!" he ejaculated. "That is no wise man's move. Doesn't he know that Sybil would never address Bradd Brownell as 'my dear colonel'? Claude is doomed, anyhow! Nicholas Norway had better keep away from the mystery on the hill! What infernal fate brought him to Condor City at this day?"

CHAPTER XV.

SHADOW SIMON MEETS HIS MATCH.

WE quit Condor City at this juncture for a short time to follow the fortunes of Shadow Simon, the man sent from the palace to overtake the "black-eyed viper," Silver Sybil.

The reader has already seen how the woman avoided him by halting on the mountain trail until he got ahead, not knowing that he had passed within a few feet of her.

About fifty miles south of Condor as the crow flies stood Yuba City, a mining-camp with a very mixed population, and one considerably selfish in more ways than one.

Yuba was not as large as Condor, but it was not under the thumb of any one man. Its mines were productive enough to furnish a part of its people with what money they wanted to risk at the numerous gambling dens that infested the camp, and chance players came from a distance to have a bout with what was called "Yuba fortune" for many miles around.

This camp was Shadow Simon's first halt.

He had not spared his horse, and as the animal was of excellent bottom, he found himself riding into Yuba a little in advance of morning.

He had made the journey in remarkably short time, and with the thought that Sybil was ahead and not behind him.

Yuba was not unknown to Shadow Simon.

Several times before he had gone thither in

Bradd Brownell's employ, but never on a mission like his present one.

There were a few people in the camp with whom he had an acquaintance, but they were mainly keepers of the faro dens or their dealers.

Nobody could keep track of Yuba's shifting population. It was constantly on the move as fortune waned in the mines and at the play-tables.

If Shadow Simon had thought that by any chance he had got ahead of Sybil he would not have spurred on to Yuba in such haste, but he thought nothing of the kind.

The ride had made him thirsty and his first halt was in front of a drink-shop with whose proprietor he had some acquaintance.

Back of the saloon was one of the many curses of Yuba City, a faro-room, and well filled despite the early hour at which Simon called.

He was cordially welcomed by the man behind the rough bar.

"Just in from Condor, eh?" exclaimed the liquor-vender.

Simon threw a quick glance at the men visible through the open door at the end of the room and nodded.

Shadow Simon did not believe in treating a crowd when nothing was to be gained by it, and his experience in Yuba had told him that its average citizen was always ready for a free drink.

"They're the solid fellows in there, the stay-ers," said the barkeeper, catching Simon's solicitous glance. "The whisky Micawbers left some time ago. What'll you take?—this?" and a bottle came up from beneath the counter and was set before the messenger.

As Simon was helping himself a man came out of the game-room and approached him.

He looked like a person in the neighborhood of sixty, though his figure was straight, and his step uncommonly agile.

"Good-by," said the man to the person behind the counter as he put his right hand forward. "This is my day, you know."

"You are going, then?"

"Yes."

"South?"

"I can't say. It matters little where I go."

The last words were spoken in a tone that struck Simon peculiarly.

The man spoke like a person in despair.

"I didn't lose much in there," he went on, nodding toward the tables he had just left, "because I hadn't much to lose. Still, it was all!" he added with a painful smile. "I guess fortune has left me forever. No; thanks. I don't want anything. I will not take even a drink from Yuba with me."

Meantime this man and the barkeeper had joined hands over the counter, and Shadow Simon had disposed of his drink after the usual manner.

"Good luck go with you," exclaimed the bartender as the hands fell apart.

"Better than I've had, eh?"

"A thousand times!" was the response.

"Mebbe you might strike a bonanza in Condor City. This gentleman is just from there."

In an instant the eyes of the strange man were riveted upon Simon.

What eyes they were! dark, deep and piercing!

"So you are just from Condor?" he said, looking the nabob's messenger over from head to foot.

"Yes."

"What's the news there?"

"We never have any," laughed Simon.

"How's the Condor Vanderbilt getting on?"

He seemed to indicate by his tones that he did not have the friendliest feelings for Bradd Brownell, and Simon interpreted him in this manner.

"Oh, he 'tends to his own business," he snapped.

The almost colorless face of the stranger got red in splotches.

"Did he always do that?" he asked, leaning suddenly toward Simon.

Shadow Simon drew back and looked madly at the man.

"Maybe you're talking to one o' Bradd Brownell's friends," he cried.

"I know I am if you have come in from Condor City!" was the reply. "He owns you all up there, body, boots and soul!"

Simon seemed to flush scarlet.

"That includes me!" he flashed. "By Jupiter! there lives no man who can throw an insult in my teeth without having it resented at once! I don't know who you are. I don't care; but I say that I am no man's property! There, sir!"

"No man's property and yet a citizen of Condor City?" suddenly laughed the stranger.

"How's that, Juan?" and he looked at the barkeeper who, eager for a diversion of some kind, was enjoying the scene. "What is this fellow's name?"

"I am Shadow Simon!" answered the Condor sport for himself.

"So! the Gold Grandee's butler and body-servant!" was the instant retort, much to Simon's surprise. "I'm glad to see you, sir. How

moves affairs in the golden web on the hill? The Grandee's servant, but not his slave! Oh, no, sir!"

"It is a—a lie!" roared Shadow Simon, bringing down his right fist with emphasis on the counter, and leaning toward the stranger at the same time. "Mebbe you want to go from Yuba with a Condor City memento! Well, I'm your man!"

The next moment the eyes of the stranger got a light that made Simon recoil, but he was instantly followed.

"I shall delight to send you home with a little recollection of Yuba!" he cried, and in the space of a flash Shadow Simon found himself in a grasp that held his arms from inflicting any harm.

"Drop me!" he exclaimed as he was suddenly lifted from his feet. "By the eyes of Jupiter! I'll have more than your blood if you hurt me!"

The response was a laugh.

"This man is a lion in strength," passed through Simon's mind. "What is he going to do?"

Already Shadow Simon was being held against the counter, and the man he had challenged was looking into his face with an expression between burning hatred and a grin.

All at once he jerked the Condor City sport forward and then hurried him toward the faro room.

Shadow Simon did not seem to touch the floor once in the whole distance.

"Gentlemen, I play my last card before leaving Yuba!" exclaimed the stranger as he forced Simon through the door.

"I stake this Condor galoot against fortune's all. You will find him in the corner yonder."

Shadow Simon knew what was coming and tried to guard against it, but the stranger was too much for him.

He was suddenly jerked above the man's head and held poised there for a moment, then all at once he was hurled forward over the heads of the astonished gamblers!

Crash! he struck the wall with a force that threatened to take him through the building, and though not rendered insensible, he went to the floor with his brain in a whirl.

He would not have believed that one man possessed that degree of strength for he (Simon) was no small man.

As the nabob's tool struck the wall the stranger turned and walked away, admiringly followed by the looks of the gamblers who had witnessed his astonishing feat.

Simon was allowed to pick himself up, which he did in a few moments, and then with a torrent of oaths on his lips he broke for the bar-room with a cocked revolver in his right hand.

But the man was gone!

"In God's name who was that tornado?" cried Simon halting at the counter.

"We call him Captain Mystery."

"He's a regular catapult!" was the answer. "Captain Mystery, eh?"

"Of course that's only a nickname. He never cared to tell us much about himself, and he got the name by common consent."

"When did he come to Yuba?"

"About a year ago."

"Alone?"

"Alone."

"Whar did he come from?"

"Nobody knows, but from everywhere, I guess. He never wins."

Shadow Simon did not hear the last remark.

"He is going away from Yuba, he said."

"He's gone now."

Simon turned instinctively toward the door.

"Don't you know anything at all about Captain Mystery?" he asked.

"Almighty little."

"Well, what is that little?" And Simon came back toward the counter, with curiosity visible in his eye.

"He's lived in Denver. I've discovered this much," was the response. "And I think he was robbed there—robbed at one fell swoop of all he had in the world."

Bradd Brownell's tool could hardly keep back a startling cry.

"Go on!" he cried eagerly.

"What shall I say? He never made anybody in Yuba a secret-keeper. What I know I've picked up at odd intervals. I know that he curses the tenth of November."

"The Old Harry he does!" ejaculated Simon. "That settles it with Captain Mystery!"

And the following moment he sprang from the saloon wonderfully agile for a man who had lately been thrown against a wall with almost crushing force.

"Jehu! Why didn't we know this before?" he went on in the first flushes of the new day, with the saloon at his back. "Can it be possible that Gold Dresden, the old Denver nabob has lived a year within fifty miles of the palace? Why hasn't he come nearer if he is the man who gave Captain Bradd his start? I can afford to let Silver Sybil go for the present to track this man. The captain will approve of my course. Mebbe the black-eyed viper knows about him. Jupiter! things look that way now."

Shadow Simon seemed to forget his bruises,

Silver Sybil—everything in his eagerness to find Captain Mystery.

He gave himself no rest till he had ransacked the town, but the hunt gave him no reward.

The man supposed to be Sir Harold Harcourt, the Englishman, had disappeared, and nobody could tell Simon which trail he had taken.

CHAPTER XVI. A MOUNTAIN TRAP.

"WELL, if I can't find Captain Mystery, who is no other than Gold Dresden, I can keep my eyes open for Silver Sybil!" said Simon to himself, when he was forced to give up the hunt. "If I had known last night what I know now, somebody wouldn't have left Yuba City as easily as somebody did. There's no doubt of it. The man on whom Cap'n Bradd played the little game in Denver two years ago was the same chap who nearly broke me on a wall just before daylight. Why, Bradd thinks him dead, or, if living, maybe a thousand miles from the palace. Jehu! here he's been only fifty miles away for a hull year!"

The sun came up, but Shadow Simon's watchful eyes were not gladdened by a glimpse of the woman he had been ordered to stop.

Did Bradd Brownell fear that she was on the road to some old enemy? Could he dream that she was in communication with Captain Mystery, or Gold Dresden, his Denver victim?

Shadow Simon had had no sleep.

He did not want any when out on a mission as important as the present one, and barring a little soreness caused by his sudden collision with the wall in the faro-room, he was as fresh as ever.

He had seen and talked to more than twenty men about Captain Mystery, but not one could tell him more than the bartender had done.

Still, his belief in the man's identity was not shaken, yet this question would always intrude itself:

If the man was Sir Harold Harcourt, why had he not tried to get even with Bradd Brownell? Why had he not played some kind of a game of vengeance at Condor City or in the palace itself?

At last Simon began to think that Silver Sybil, if she had kept on, had not stopped at Yuba, that her mission was not a visit to Captain Mystery after all.

This thought became belief as the morning broadened and the sun crept up the sky.

Had he missed the woman?

He dared not go back to the palace and tell the man he served that he had not found the black-eyed viper, and it would not pay to return with a lie.

Simon was in a dilemma.

"If she went through Yuba it was just before day, when it was darkest," he ejaculated. "Nobody saw her. Juan says he remembers having seen the woman once or twice in camp, but not with Captain Mystery. Maybe I'd better go on to Owlet Ranch. She's traveling by daylight now, if she's on the road. I am ter follow her till I find her, them's the orders."

Shadow Simon did not finish in the best of humor, and with the last word he turned and walked doggedly toward the low building where he had stabled his steed.

To mount again and seek Silver Sybil was the only course before him.

If he found her soon he would turn about and look for Captain Mystery's trail.

Just as Simon was about to enter the stable a voice let loose a coarse "hallo!" and thinking that the call was for him he turned to answer.

About twenty yards away stood a man rather fancifully clad. He had a reddish jacket, open all the way down, with broad silver lacings at the front and bright metallic buttons, wide pantaloons that reached to the heels of his close-fitting boots, a light sombrero with two tassels dangling over his left ear, and a sash for a pistol-belt.

Simon already knew that all kinds of people formed the population of Yuba City, but this fellow looked so fresh, with his gaudy clothes, dark skin and sparkling eyes, that the Grandee's messenger was attracted.

His "hello" was undoubtedly intended for Simon, for he came forward while he waited at the stable door.

"Did you find *el capitan*?" asked the stranger, whose manner of speech proclaimed him of Mexican descent, if not a full blood.

"No, but who told you I was hunting him?"

"Senor Juan," was the answer.

"Well, I have seen him."

"You?" exclaimed Simon.

"Si, senor. I have just come to Yuba."

"From the south?"

"From Owlet."

"And you really saw Captain Mystery?"

"I saw him."

"The rascal is going away sure enough," said Simon through his teeth. "He was on the Owlet trail, then?"

"Si."

"Alone?"

"Alone."

An expression of pleasure overspread Shadow Simon's face.

Captain Mystery was on the same trail he was about to take in search of Silver Sybil.

What fortune could be better?

It would be bringing down two birds at one shot, and birds like those were not to be found every day.

Simon thanked the Mexican for his service, and went on with his preparations.

"Fortune brought that Greaser to me!" he ejaculated. "Without his information I might have run unexpectedly upon Captain Mystery. Now I will be on the lookout for him. If I succeed Cap'n Brownell will pension the yellow-skin for life!"

Shadow Simon hurried through with his work, and when he was fixing the girth-buckles at the last hole, somebody darkened the door.

"Juan says she's come!" exclaimed a boyish voice.

Simon nearly dropped the strap.

A good chunk of a boy stood between him and the low door, and Simon went forward as if he intended to pitch his caller into the street.

"Who's come?" he cried.

"The woman; Juan says she hes."

Simon reflected a moment.

"Oh, yes—I know!" he exclaimed, and then he caught the boy's arm.

"What is she?"

The little fellow shook his head.

"You don't know, eh?"

"No. Juan does, though, for he says she's come."

"All right. I'll be on hand."

The boy disappeared, and the tightening of the girth interested Simon no more just then.

Three minutes later he entered Juan's bar-room from the faro den, and leaned over the bar.

"What is she?" he asked, showing Juana a pair of snapping eyes as they met his.

"At the quarters she keeps when she does come," was the reply.

"And that is—"

"At Benito's Plaza Palace."

"Ah! under cover there!" exclaimed Simon, slightly drawing back, as if the information was a little disappointing.

"You might get her out if you don't want to see her there," answered Juan, with a smile.

"She came in a while ago, and hardly any one saw her go to the hotel. Does she want to see you?"

"I reckon not," said Simon, showing his teeth over the words. "Leastwise, she won't hunt me up. I told you awhile ago to make up your mind whether she can have met Captain Mystery."

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I have had a few of the boys help me," replied Juan. "They have been seen together."

"Within the last year?"

"Within six months."

"That settles a good deal!" ejaculated Shadow Simon, significantly. "Who is the boy you sent to me?"

"We call him Mardo?"

"Your boy?"

"No; everybody's."

"Is he about now?"

"I hear him in the room yonder. Mardo!"

The next instant the boy who had carried Juan's message to Simon made his appearance.

"This gentleman," said Juan, pointing to Simon.

The boy came up with his hat in his hands and waited for Simon's orders with a pair of sparkling eyes of the deepest black.

Mardo, in Simon's eyes, did not look any too scrupulous, but he had that secretive ness which the nabob's messenger wanted in a person to be taken into his service at that time.

"I've got a little business with the boy," suddenly continued Shadow Simon with a glance at Juan.

"There's a room over the faro tables," was the prompt answer. "Mardo, show the gentleman the way."

A short time after the boy again stood before the Condor City sport waiting for orders, but in a small room whose contents were half a dozen empty barrels.

Simon, although in a hurry, began by questioning the boy to satisfy himself that he was not going to trap himself.

To all his interrogatives Mardo replied without reserve, and then Simon got to the business at his tongue's end.

"You know Captain Mystery, Mardo?"

"Yes."

"And the woman who sometimes comes to Yuba from the north?"

"The woman with the black eyes?"

"Yes."

"I have seen her."

"She is now at Manuel Benito's Palace. She wants to see Captain Mystery. She came to Yuba to see him on important business. Unfortunately the captain left Yuba just about daylight. Still the lady at the Palace must not be disappointed."

Mardo listened to all this with his large dark eyes fastened on Simon's face.

"Now, you are to go to the lady and tell her that Captain Mystery has taken the Owlet Ranch trail, that he left secret word with you to tell her, if she came soon, that he would meet her

there. You understand this, Mardo? You are to be the captain's secret messenger; you know nothing about me."

As Shadow Simon spoke, he took a bright gold eagle from his pocket and held it in such a manner that Mardo was bound to notice it.

The boy merely nodded and continued looking at him.

"Why don't you say what you will do?" cried Simon, somewhat exasperated at these proceedings.

"Are you through?" asked Mardo, meekly.

"Thunder! yes. I don't give you more orders than you could remember. You will do this?"

"Yes."

Simon held out the coin and the bronzed boy darted upon it like a hawk, and stowed it away in his pocket.

"Don't forget a word!" admonished Bradd Brownell's mau. "Captain Mystery wants to see the woman Silver Sybil at Owlet Ranch. You don't know why he left Yuba; you know nothing only what he told you for her ears." And Mardo was gone.

"I guess I've got a trap set for the biggest game in California," murmured Simon when he found himself going back to the stable. "Cap'n Bradd has put my faculties to the test before. Well, I'm a hustler from 'way back on a trail of this kind, though I didn't like to pit myself against the black-eyed viper at first."

Just ten minutes after he had dismissed Mardo a black horse carried a man through the suburbs of Yuba City, and struck the south trail some distance from the camp.

The rider was Shadow Simon and he had congratulated himself on having left Yuba unseen although the day was fairly on.

"Now my Shasta tigress come down to the trap!" he exclaimed, throwing a glance toward the camp. "Mardo has performed his service by this time, and I have but to wait for you here."

He slipped from his horse which he led some distance into the tall young trees that bordered the trail, and when he came back he wore a mask that fell below his chin.

But his eyes were seen sparkling behind the dark cloth and they watched eagerly for his victim.

CHAPTER XVII. MARDO'S LIE.

MEANTIME Mardo the boy had gone to the Plaza Palace, Yuba City's one hotel, to carry out his part of the programme against Silver Sybil.

Mardo who was growing up into a typical mountain sport, had an elastic conscience. He did not care to know why Shadow Simon wanted the woman to set out for Owlet Ranch.

He had been paid to deliver and stick to a certain message, and he intended to do nothing less.

When he reached the California hostelry his first inquiry was for Silver Sybil.

The keen black eyes of the proprietor, a man from lower California, yellow like a Mexican, and with the voice of one, instantly fastened themselves on Mardo.

The brazen young tough did not wince.

"What does a young piece of human cursedness like you want with her, hey?" Manuel, the landlord exclaimed.

"I've got business with her," replied the boy, swelling out in an important manner.

"A letter, eh?" and Manuel put forth his hand.

"I'm no mail-sack!" cried Mardo. "Maybe you don't want your guests to hear anything to their advantage. I've got business with the lady who came in awhile ago—business o' importance, too."

The boy raised his voice to a key calculated to reach certain ears which he believed to be not far away.

"My guest has retired to her room, and may be asleep—"

"I am not asleep, Captain Manuel!" exclaimed a voice, accompanied with a light laugh, and at the same time the queenly figure of a beautiful woman appeared in the doorway leading to the stairs. "What is it the boy wants?"

"Hyer's the queen herself!" ejaculated Mardo, throwing a look of triumph at Manuel as he sprung toward Silver Sybil. "I have an important message for you," he went on. "A message from the man you want to see!" he added, in a lower and significant tone.

Sybil started, and allowed her eyes to rest on Mardo's countenance as though she would determine his honesty. Then she held out her hand.

"Oh, it isn't that kind of a message!" exclaimed the boy, drawing back. "He didn't put it down in black an' white. The captain is no fool, my queen."

"Come with me," was the reply, and a minute later Silver Sybil led Mardo into a room and shut the door after them.

There was curiosity in the woman's eyes; it was mixed with a good deal of eagerness.

She seemed to be asking herself, why had somebody intrusted an important message to Mardo?

"Now open your budget of news for me," she cried, turning suddenly upon the boy.

Mardo was waiting for the command; he knew what he was going to say.

"Well, he has gone south," said Shadow Simon's tool.

Silver Sybil started.

"The captain?" she exclaimed.

"Captain Mystery."

"When did he go?"

"A little while before day."

Sybil looked astonished, mystified.

"He left a request for you to follow him as soon as possible," Mardo went on. "He told me to tell you. He expects to stop awhile at Owlet Ranch."

"How long?"

"He did not say."

The woman from Condor City stood silent before the boy, and was looking down into his eyes, which were playing their part to a line.

"I don't know what would take him?" she murmured. "Did the presence of Shadow Simon drive him away? I wonder if Bradd Brownell's man stopped here?" and then she came back to the present and to the person before her.

"When did he tell you this?" she asked.

"A little while before he left."

"At his cabin?"

"Yes."

Mardo seemed to have all his answers ready; he did not hesitate a second.

"I am much obliged to you for the information," said Sybil at last. "You have nothing more to say?"

"I guess not. I've given you the whole lay-out. He wanted you to follow at once if you came; he seemed very anxious about this."

"I'll not forget," answered Silver Sybil, and concluding that his mission was ended Mardo backed toward the door.

"Have you been paid for your work?" suddenly asked the woman, displaying a gold coin which made the boy's eyes glitter.

"No, but never mind that," was the reply; but at the same time Mardo's eyes spoke a different language, which Sybil noted with a smile.

She crossed the room toward the boy who had stopped at the door and without much persuasion got him to accept the money, which disappeared in the depths of his pocket.

The next moment Mardo gave the woman a parting salute and bounded away, passing through the reception room so quickly that Manuel scarcely saw him.

"Manuel, a moment this way," said the voice of Silver Sybil about the time Mardo reached the street with two fees for the same service in his pocket.

The landlord of the Plaza Palace was soon at the woman's side, waiting for her to proceed.

"Who is that boy?" she asked.

"Mardo, the young liar of Yuba City," answered Manuel with some show of resentment. "He's the toughest young rascal in California."

"Not reliable then?"

"Well, I'd like to have most o' his statements backed up with an affidavit," said Manuel. "He had a message for you, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, he might be solid on that," ejaculated Manuel; "but I'd never make him my Mercury while I war able to carry my own mail."

A faint smile appeared at Sybil's lips perhaps for Manuel's manner of expression.

"What do you know about Captain Mystery's going away?" asked the woman.

"Mebbe he has after what happened at Juan's," laughed Benito, the landlord.

Sybil started and seemed to change color.

"What happened?"

"He nearly threw a man through the wall—Gunnison Gid gave me the outlines of the play awhile ago."

"Was the man Captain Mystery's enemy?"

"Not particularly so. He had lately got in, came horseback, an' his animal was at the door at the time. One o' Juan's customers recognized him as Shadow Simon from the big camp north o' us."

"From Condor City?"

"From Condor."

"What became of Shadow Simon?"

Silver Sybil's questions were couched in a tone that showed her eagerness.

"He was still hyer after daylight. He makes Juan's his quarters when he comes down, which ain't often. He wouldn't come here for a thousand, I reckon."

Sybil wanted to ask another question, but she kept it back. She could not afford to be too eager for information about Shadow Simon.

Manuel Benito did not proceed to enlighten her in regard to Simon's aversion to the Plaza Palace, and when Sybil had waited a moment but in vain for the wanted information, she said eagerly:

"I want to know whether Captain Mystery has departed," she exclaimed. "Mardo, the boy, delivered a message from him, but you say that Mardo sometimes is unreliable."

"I say I'd rather trust other people whom I know," answered the landlord.

"Then, do me a favor," continued Sybil.

"Go to Captain Mystery's cabin. On the wall to the right as you enter the door is a little shelf. It can be taken down with very little effort. Behind the shelf is a small opening in the log. Go there, Manuel Benito, and fetch me the contents of the little place if there be anything in it. After what has happened I do not want to go myself. If there is no message from the captain in the secret wall-pocket I must conclude that Mardo's message was genuine."

The landlord of the Plaza Palace seemed eager to obey his pretty guest, and a few moments later was on his way to Captain Mystery's cabin.

"She doesn't more'n half-swallow my message!" exclaimed a sharp-eyed boy, who caught sight of Manuel as he was about to enter the shanty. "The moment I saw those black eyes fastened on me I knew I was dealing with a keener. If Shadow Simon expects to get ahead o' that Condor seraph, he'll have to keep awake all day."

Silver Sybil waited for Benito's return with a good deal of impatience.

"Simon may be somewhere in Yuba watching me, but I will outwit him!" she exclaimed.

"Bradd Brownell is not willing that I should quit Condor just now unmolested. He sends his human shadow to watch me. That shadow fell into the hands of Captain Mystery, and got thrown against a wall. Serves the shadow right. One of these days the spider in the gold web will discover that human strength must succumb to vengeance. And that despite his Shadow Simons, and Buzzard Belts!"

At this juncture Manuel Benito made his appearance, and his eyes sparkled as he thrust one hand into his bosom.

"You have it?" exclaimed Silver Sybil, springing toward him. "There was a letter for me behind the bracket?"

The landlord produced a piece of folded paper which Sybil eagerly snatched from his hand and opened.

"Aha!" she exclaimed, at the first glimpse of its contents, and then she read in a breath the following message:

"I have gone away—to Owlet for a spell, and then beyond. What do you know by this time? I have nearly given up the fight. Fortune and fate are against me. To Owlet for a few days, and then beyond!"

HAROLD.

Sybil looked up at the yellow-faced landlord from the bottom of the message.

There was not much color on her face. It was like some unseen hand had sprinkled it with ashes.

"I guess Mardo delivered a true message," she exclaimed. "What did the inside of his cabin look like?"

"Deserted, like."

"As if its tenant had gone away to stay?"

"Yes."

"Bring out my horse. He has had rest enough. I did not ride him hard all the way last night."

"Are you going after Captain Mystery?" asked Manuel.

Silver Sybil smiled.

"Which way?"

"South."

"Mebbe you'd better take somebody along to Owlet."

"Why?"

"Black Mask Burt came back to the old trail last week and got a good lift."

"I'll take care of myself!" laughed Sybil.

"I will not be friendless if I do go alone. I'll take my horse, Manuel Benito."

The landlord turned away with a muttered remark whose import the woman from Condor did not catch.

The message found in the log had confirmed Mardo's story.

But for this Silver Sybil might not have galloped as she did from Yuba City and toward the man waiting for her at the fringe of the California trail.

Captain Mystery's letter had excited her.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FOR WOLF AND VULTURE.

"MEBBE Mardo went back on me!" ejaculated the man who looked anxiously up a narrow but well-defined trail from beneath the dark mask that dropped below his chin. "If the young rascal did anything o' thet kind, if he gave me away, by Jupiter!—Ho! she comes at last!"

At that moment the man's eyes got a new sparkle and he instinctively drew back.

A moving object was discernible some distance up the trail, and it took but a second glance to tell that it was a horse ridden by a woman.

"Now I'll show the black-eyed viper a trick that'll open her peepers!" he laughed while he waited with his fingers about the butt of a revolver. "Captain Bradd sent me out to catch the Condor City witch, an' I reckon I'm goin' to do it. Well, yes!"

In a little while the man, Shadow Simon, as the reader knows; could hear the horse that carried Sybil over the trail.

A few moments would decide it all.

The woman came along with her deep black eyes on the alert, but they were not keen enough to see the man waiting quietly for her.

All at once Shadow Simon stepped into view.

Silver Sybil gave vent to a low cry and recoiled in the saddle, but as a laugh of triumph moved the lower part of the mask, Simon threw up his revolver.

"Don't make me fool with the trigger!" he said trying to disguise his voice.

"What is it?" asked Sybil recovering and leaning forward. "They told me in Yuba that you've been at your old tricks again on this trail. I've got nothing for you, Black Mask Burt."

"But you will let me be the judge," was the answer.

"Sybil threw up her empty hands; she knew the customs of the country."

Shadow Simon stood at her horse's head, and she was looking down into his eyes.

"Goin' south, eh?" he exclaimed.

"Yes."

"On business?"

"Do you think I'd ride this trail for nothing?" was the quick response, which brought a flush to the woman's face.

"I know you would not. You are bound for Owlet?"

"Perhaps."

"Mebbe beyond, eh?"

"Maybe to the ends of the world!" ejaculated Sybil, with a light laugh.

"Very well, I'll ride with you a little distance!"

Sybil gave Shadow Simon a wondering look.

The next moment, the man from Condor City gave a loud and peculiar whistle.

In an instant there was a noise to the right of the trail, and a splendid black horse came forward.

Simon glanced at Sybil to note whether she recognized the steed, but she did not seem to. As the horse came up to him, he turned half-way round, and vaulted nimbly into the saddle.

"Now, off we are!" cried Simon, looking at a Sybil. "Two can ride abreast on this trail. You would sooner ride alone, hey?" and he laughed as he finished.

The following minute the pair were riding at a walk down the trail, the horses side by side, and the revolver still in Simon's right hand.

"Not just yet!" muttered the gold king's shadow. "I want to find out a few things first. Then I'll play the game out to the captain's satisfaction. She doesn't know me yet. To her I am Black Mask Burt, who used to make these parts his vantage ground."

Suddenly Simon turned the batteries of his eyes upon Sybil, and in his eagerness, leaned forward until his mask almost touched her face.

"You're from Condor!" he exclaimed.

"What if I am?" was the answer.

"How's my old friend, the nabob, gettin' along?"

At mention of the gold spider, Sybil seemed to lose color, but Simon saw that her eyes got an indignant flash.

"That is what I want to see!" passed through his mind. "I'd like to know why Bradd wants her followed an' silenced."

Then he went on aloud:

"You don't like the nabob. I can tell that by your eyes. They give you away. Well, he's no saint, no seraph, by a long shot."

"He's a demon!" snapped Sybil, as if the hate of a lifetime was in her words.

"I think you're about half right," replied Simon, adroitly. "You don't like Bradd Brownell?"

"I don't!"

It was a frank confession and not unexpected.

"Did you know him before he came to Condor?"

"I did."

"Ho! it's an old grudge, then!" laughed Shadow Simon.

"One of the best in California, too!" hissed the woman.

"I can't guess," and Simon drew off and looked at her.

"I think not, if you are Black Mask Burt," was the response. "But we are riding too slow. You forget that I have business at Owlet Ranch, perhaps beyond. I have nothing worth taking, not even a watch. There will be better plunder along after a while if you will wait."

"I'd rather not wait. My pretty queen, I've found just what I was looking for." And Simon's face crept forward again with the old leer of a desperado's triumph under his beetling brows. "Is it possible, Silver Sybil, that you are running away from the man you hate?"

The next second a change came over the woman's face, and before Simon could guess its meaning she darted forward and her hand flew up.

"What's under your mask? Let me see!" she cried, and all at once her eager fingers clutched the cloth and jerked it away ere a hand could interpose.

"Shadow Simon!" yelled from Sybil's throat. "Ah! you are playing a game for your master!"

Silver Sybil threw the captured mask upon

the ground and sent her hand toward the fold of her dress.

"Hold, thar!" cried Shadow Simon. "We don't want any—"

The sharp click of something metallic as her hand came up again broke his sentence, and he could look over the viper's revolver into a pair of dancing black eyes.

"You will consider the tables turned!" Sybil went on. "This is the way you work for Bradd Brownell outside of the gold palace, is it? It takes more than a collision with a wall to damp your ardor, I see. Are you going to Owlet Ranch, Simon?"

The man's consternation seemed to deprive him of the power of speech.

"This woman is a tiger-cat of the best blood!" he thought. "I am likely to go back to Bradd in poor condition if I go back at all. Curse the day Silver Sybil ever saw the Shasta kentry!"

Simon could well heap anathemas of this kind upon the head of the woman who had cornered him by a totally unlooked-for movement.

He did not choose to answer her last question, which was steeped in sarcasm.

He was at her mercy, and she might conduct him to Owlet Ranch or elsewhere and turn him over to Captain Mystery, the man who had thrown him against a wall.

"Let me turn questioner, Simon," Sybil suddenly said. "You followed me from Condor City?"

He did not speak.

"Let me inform you that you passed me on the trail," she went on.

Simon started.

"Before we proceed further drop your revolver; let it fall to the ground."

The nabob's tool was inclined to hesitate, but one look into the eyes straight ahead loosened his grip and the weapon fell.

"The other one now!" said the same stern voice.

In like manner Shadow Simon gave up his second revolver, which was followed by the knife he had set his heart on as an effective silencer of the woman who had trapped him.

"You knew I would leave Yuba City," Sybil abruptly continued.

"Yes."

"And in mask you waited for me. Ah! Simon, Bradd Brownell never had a better slave. Do you know how I came to suspect you? I suddenly recognized the horse. There is but one Black Whirlwind, and he belongs to the man in the gold web. The horse gave you away, for when I recognized him I knew that Black Mask But never rode him."

Simon's teeth met, and in the tempest of rage that swept his heart at that moment, he could have killed the best steed in California.

"I am going to Owlet, but you will stop here!" exclaimed Sybil. "There is a lariat attached to your saddle, Simon. You took Black Whirlwind from the stables fully equipped. Take the cord off and hand it to me."

Sullenly and in silence Shadow Simon obeyed, and as Sybil took the coil a thrill ran through his frame.

"Dismount!" was the next command.

Simon looked at the black eyes, but saw no leniency in their depths.

"At the mercy of the merciless! My God!" thought he, but without a word he climbed down and waited for the next move.

Into the forest at the right of the road ran a narrow trail or natural lane, and Simon saw that Sybil's eyes had singled it out.

"Let the horse go!" cried Sybil, catching the solicitous glance Simon threw toward his steed. "About face! there. Now forward, down the path! Turn neither to the right nor to the left. Keep straight ahead."

Simon's brief hope that he was going to be marched out of Sybil's sight was one of brief duration, for a glance over his shoulder showed him the mounted foe at his heels.

He went forward among the trees, keeping the path which was discernible all the way, and wondering when the halt was to take place.

The march was kept up until the couple reached a little open glade. Simon could look up and see a large quantity of blue sky almost as soft as the firmament of June.

A few tall trees were standing here and there, sometimes singly, and sometimes in little groups.

Their tops seemed to pierce the blue overhead.

"Straight to the solitary tree in front of you!" suddenly commanded Silver Sybil.

Simon kept forward till he reached the tree.

"Halt! Now hold your hands above your head and against the tree!" continued the woman. "You can turn your back to the bark; there!"

It was a painful position, but the man at the woman's mercy dared not remonstrate.

Sybil urged the horse forward and Simon saw that she now had the coil of rope in her hands.

All at once she leaned toward him and by a quick movement passed the lariat around his arms and the tree, pinioning them to it almost in the drop of an eyelash.

Then for the next few seconds Sybil rode

around the wretched man and wound the rope about his body from his throat to his ankles, knotting it now and then in a peculiar manner that rendered the strange captivity complete!

Simon could only watch her and show his teeth. His eyes could tell her that some day vengeance would be taken for this work.

Some day—if he lived!

At last Sybil, who had dismounted, went back to her saddle, and laughed as she rode off:

"Good-by, Shadow Simon. I leave you to the wolf and the vulture! And all because I hate your master!"

CHAPTER XIX.

BACK TO THE GOLD PALACE.

WE turn to other scenes; we go back to Condor City.

While the events just witnessed in and about Yuba were transpiring, fleeting moments were bringing on the time set apart for Crimson Claude's trial.

Nicholas Norway had left his letter of warning on the sill of Bradd Brownell's front door.

The Prince of Bismarck had risked a good deal in taking it thither in person.

If there were any guards he would be seen and pounced upon, dragged into the presence of his old master, and probably consigned to imprisonment if not to instant death.

But he accomplished the hazardous feat successfully, and tried to picture the Gold Grandee's astonishment when he discovered, as he certainly would before the trial, that Buzzard Belt was Crimson Claude, the California Sleuth.

"I guess I'm gettin' even with him!" ejaculated Nick as he crept down the hill through the dark shadows of the fleeing night. "I put Silver Sybil's initials to the bottom of my note, and the cap'n will have a scene with her over the matter. I've played a few tricks before, and this is not one of the least in my career."

"Captain," said a man who came into one of the finest rooms of the palace just before daylight and found Bradd Brownell there. "Captain, we've had a visitor."

The Grandee started and gave the early intruder a quick inquisitorial look.

"He left this on the front step. It is a bit of paper folded, and it looks like a letter."

Bradd had already caught sight of the paper in the man's hand, and extended his own for it.

A moment later he had opened the warning and was reading the words Nick had scrawled with the top of Diamond Dart's table for a desk.

"Great God!" he suddenly ejaculated. "It is impossible! That man Gold Dresden the Englishman's sleuth? I don't believe it!"

"Who found this at the door?" he asked.

"I found it."

Bradd looked at the paper again.

"Ho! here are two S's at the bottom!" he exclaimed. "What do they mean?"

"They would stand for Silver Sybil if they meant anybody in the camp."

"But she is gone. She went off last night. Did you know that, Roscoe?"

The man shook his head.

"Besides, this is not exactly a woman's handwriting," the Grandee went on, and then he handed it to the man called Roscoe, one of the men he "owned."

Roscoe leaned forward in the light of the lamp that still illumined the room and read the warning.

Bradd watched him through the black lashes, and saw that the information was a surprise.

"What do you think?" he asked with a show of impatience.

"A man wrote it," answered Roscoe positively.

"So I say, but whom?"

"That's a puzzle to me, captain. And so is the information," added Roscoe.

The Grandee laughed.

"If Buzzard Belt was the man that paper says he is, he should be treated to a noose before the hour," was the answer. "But I say I don't believe it. Several years ago I incurred the enmity of a certain man, who put Crimson Claude on my track. We all have our antagonists, Roscoe. I presume you've had yours."

Roscoe started as if Bradd had touched a tender spot, and assumed to laugh as he replied:

"Like the rest of mankind, captain!"

"Well, somehow or other Crimson Claude never did his employer much good," continued the Grandee. "I did not try to keep out of his road, but I never crossed his path. Now, that paper says that Buzzard Belt, the man who killed Monte, is the detective. Buzzard Belt has lived here for months. If he is Crimson Claude, he discovered long ago that I am the man a certain Englishman set him after once, and he would have played his hand before this. It is absurd, Roscoe."

"I think so, captain."

"Somebody wants a reward," continued the Grandee. "It is a draw on my bank by somebody who will appear by and by for the cash. We will try Buzzard Belt as Buzzard Belt. I never liked the fellow, anyhow."

"There is one thing peculiar about it all, captain," ventured Roscoe, whose look indicated a

good deal of natural shrewdness. "The sender of this letter knows something about the act you talk about—the one that took place somewhere several years ago. Now, who knows this in Condor?"

Bradd Brownell started as if a new thought had been brought into being by his man's words.

"By heavens! that is true, Roscoe!" he exclaimed. "You see things that escape me. I shall put you in Monte's place. Let me see. Monte knew about the Denver affair. Simon knows of it, but neither wrote that letter."

The gold king leaned back in his chair and half-closed his eyes, as if he was going over the list of Condor's inhabitants.

"None of the boys could have done it!" he ejaculated. "But there is one man in Condor who is not my friend. That person is Diamond Dart."

"Oh, the fellow who holds his little shanty at a million!" exclaimed Roscoe. "But a friend wrote the warning, evidently."

The puzzle seemed to grow deeper.

"Hang it all, Roscoe, we will let the mystery go for the present!" cried Bradd. "You will see that nobody goes to work in the mines till after the trial and condemnation. I want the boys on the plaza at nine o'clock."

"What kind of trial shall be ordered?"

"For form's sake, a jury trial," was the answer. "We don't sport regular law courts in the Shasta country, but it is best to have a semblance of justice, even here. Monte died at the hands of Buzzard Belt. The accursed dog does not deny this; but he says that Monte attempted to play the stand-and-deliver act, that he wore a mask when killed. His statement must be substantiated before it can be taken by the jury, and proven it cannot be. The prosecution will testify to the previous good character of Monte, that he was never seen to have a mask in his possession, that he never plundered any one. We can make out a case, I think, when we do this."

"A case good enough to go to a Condor City jury," observed Roscoe, with a smile.

"That is it exactly, Roscoe!—a case good enough for our jury!" was the reply. "I gave orders that Buzzard Belt should be secretly guarded through the night. There should be a report by this time."

At that moment a noise in an adjoining room attracted the attention of both men, and as Roscoe moved forward to investigate, the door opened and a typical mountain tough entered.

"Well, Abe, how is the prisoner?" exclaimed Bradd Brownell at sight of the man, who evidently had something to communicate.

"He's thar yet, cap'n," was the report. "I guess he intends ter stan' ther racket."

"He made no queer movements last night, eh?"

"Not one. We never lost sight of him long enough to give him a chance."

"Good. We will show him that the blood of Monte shall not flow unavenged!" exclaimed Bradd through his teeth.

"But, cap'n, do you know anything about the man at Diamond Dart's?" suddenly inquired the bronzed guard.

"A man at Diamond's?" he echoed.

"A strange man."

"Who saw him?"

"Stormy Steve."

"When?"

"A short time before day burst. He came from toward the palace."

"The Old Harry he did!" cried Bradd, glancing at Roscoe, and then the eyes of both men fell significantly upon the note of warning lying on the table.

"Was this person seen to enter Diamond's shanty?" asked the Grandee, going back to the guard.

"Steve followed him thar."

"I don't know anything about him, but I want to know something, and before the trial, too," the Grandee said. "You will go to Diamond Dart's at once, but quietly and without being heralded in any way."

The man bowed.

"If the man went there when Stormy Steve says, he may be there now, but," Bradd spoke doubtfully, "it may have been Diamond Dart after all."

A moment afterward the Shasta king and Roscoe were alone again, and they were about to resume conversation when a light rap sounded on the door nearly opposite the one through which Abe, the guard, had just disappeared.

"We'll finish later, Roscoe," cried Bradd, looking at his man. "I have a visitor, an early one, too."

Roscoe took the hint illy-concealed among his words, and left the room.

"Now for a scene, no doubt," muttered the gold king, as he crossed the room and opened the door.

Leone stood before him, as beautiful as when he first saw her happy as a bird in Lasso Pete's cabin, but her present loveliness had more stateliness than usual and the girl seemed to have lost herself in the woman.

Leone entered the room with her eyes fixed on Bradd as he held the door open, and a few feet away she turned and confronted him.

"Sit down, Leone," he said with sinister politeness. "This is an early call, but none the less welcome on that account. I trust you enjoyed a good rest in the new home—"

"There!" interrupted the girl lifting her hand as she interrupted him. "Don't call this my home. I am here thus early to ask you to open the doors of my prison."

A smile came at once to the Grandee's lips. He took a step toward Leone, but she drew back as from a touch unclean.

"This is the day you have set for his trial," she exclaimed. "What are you going to do?"

"Buzzard Belt is going to be tried for the murder of Monte," he replied.

"And trial here for him means condemnation and death!"

She advanced toward the gold king as she spoke, and when she ceased three feet did not separate them.

"You hate him," she went on. "Buzzard Belt stands between you and some cherished goal; he is in your way!"

Bradd Brownell made no reply, but his gaze happened to alight upon Nick's warning which lay open on the table almost at Leone's hand.

Her quick eyes caught the glance, and the next second she saw the paper.

"Yes, you may read it," said Bradd. "That paper came to the palace in a mysterious manner just before day."

Already Leone was reading the message, and he was watching her like a cat.

Suddenly he saw her color leave her, then it came back, and went again.

"What does this mean?" cried Leone catching up the paper. "It says that Buzzard Belt is Crimson Claude the California Sleuth. My God! is this true?"

"It says so," smiled Bradd still eying her.

"I remember now that he told me—"

She paused as if she was about to give away a damaging secret.

"He told you what?" exclaimed the nabob of Shasta leaning forward.

She shut her lips and recoiled without a vestige of color in her face.

"Ha! ha! I thought so!" he laughed. "By Jupiter! girl, you confirm the warning!"

CHAPTER XX.

INTO GOLDEN DEPTHS.

"I GUESS there's something in this after all!" Bradd Brownell went on, catching up Nick's warning and holding it before Leone's face. "You know something about the prisoner of the camp, don't you?"

The girl said nothing but looked at him as if she were collecting her forces.

"Why don't you go on and say what you were going to?" he suddenly resumed. "What did Buzzard Belt tell you?—that he is the California Sleuth, eh?"

"He told me nothing of the kind!" suddenly exclaimed Leone, and as her queenly figure straightened her eyes seemed set on fire by her words. "If he be Crimson Claude, why should he tell me? If he had told me there would be a secret for me to keep."

"Ho! I see!" cried Bradd. "A link binds you two together. But I will know something before the sun goes down. When I come back from the trial, Leone, I will be in a position to excite your wonder."

The mention of the trial which meant the doom of her friend, Buzzard Belt, brought the girl back to the threatening present.

She knew that pleadings for the prisoner would be wasted words, and such she did not intend to throw away on Bradd Brownell.

His last sentence brought forth no response.

Leone had sought him for the purpose of asking her liberty. She had asked it, and it had been refused.

"The verdict of the court will not affect your residence here," suddenly ejaculated the Gold Grandee. "I want to assure you, Leone, that the palace is your home. No other woman in California has a home like it. There are splendors here which you have not yet seen, riches of which you have no idea. I am going now. Make yourself at home here. Good-by, Leone."

He walked to the door, leaving the beautiful girl in the center of the room, her eyes fixed on him, and her bosom rising and falling like the tide of the sea.

All at once she darted toward him.

"I make no plea for him!" she exclaimed, halting before him, and throwing out one hand. "I say but this—the blood of that man will be visited upon the hand that sheds it! That is all. Remember!"

"A Nemesis! here in Shasta!" he laughed, almost before her last word had ceased to echo in the lofty chamber. "Well, Leone, it will be a poor, a futile hand the avenger will play. Again, good-morning," and the next second Leone, of Condor City, was alone in the golden cage!

"That man is the refinement of cruelty," parted her lips when she could no longer keep her sentiments within bounds. "I begin to see why Lasso Pete hated him. He knew the vulture of Shasta; he had discovered his cunning, and he knew why he wanted to see him die. And I am in the golden cage of this mountain monster, who hastens to strike the blow that will brush

another obstacle, Buzzard Belt, from his path. Can it be that the note of warning spoke the truth? Is Buzzard Belt, my new guardian, Crimson Claude, the California Sleuth? He said he would tell me something important ere long. Was the secret to be told the divulging of his true name and character? I remember that he said he was fighting for justice, that the part I was to play in the gold palace belongs to his game. If they condemn him, what?"

The girl's voice unconsciously sunk to a whisper.

"If they doom him let the slayers beware! What Bradd Brownell does to-day may change the channel of my life!"

She said no more, but left the room and ascending a flight of steps carpeted as superbly as the stairs of any city mansion, she entered a room whose windows looked down upon the gold camp lying about the little hill crowned by the house of mystery.

The morning had broken fairly over Condor City and Leone could see a number of men moving hither and thither, a sight not startling to her eyes.

As her gaze swept that portion of the camp before her it sought out a certain cabin.

The structure was not unlike its neighbors, but it had one distinction that morning; it was under guard.

Leone could see that the men who stood near it singly and in pairs had not come there by accident, but that their presence was the result of method.

"They have him under guard," murmured the girl as she watched the cabin and the men for a few minutes. "I would like to see him come out and scatter the dogs like chaff! What has become of the Grandee? Has he left the house? I see him not."

At that moment the door of the guarded cabin opened and a man appeared.

"It is Buzzard Belt! They have not bound him. Ah! there was no one in Condor bold enough to chain the lion!"

Leone saw the man lean against the rough jamb and throw a swift glance over his surroundings.

Several of the lounging men drew near and seemed to talk with him, but of course Leone could not hear a word.

But for the men or guard there was nothing to indicate that Condor City was getting ready for a trial in which a human life would be at stake.

Leone watched the scene until Buzzard Belt returned to the depths of the cabin when the men drew back and resumed their places.

All this was unnecessary; the California Sleuth had had more than one opportunity to escape since the arrest, but he had rejected all.

The young girl drew back when she could see him no longer; she went from room to room as if seeking an avenue of escape.

No door was locked against her, and when she paused it was in a room which she had never entered before.

The house was a perfect labyrinth of apartments, all of which were furnished in accordance with the wildest stories of Bradd Brownell's wealth.

"I wonder where this door leads to?" Leone asked herself, as she caught a small knob and tried to pull it toward her. "Ha! a closet and a flight of steps? Is this the way to the Grandee's wine cellars?"

The house was as still as a mummy's tomb, and with very little stretch of the imagination, Leone could believe that it was entirely deserted.

The darkness below the steps yawned like a stygian chasm, and when Leone thought of going down she involuntarily drew back.

"Why not?" she suddenly exclaimed, courageously. "I am alone here. The Gold Grandee has departed. What keeps me from trying to find his secrets? I remember my promise to Buzzard Belt. He sent me here to discover everything or nothing."

The next moment Leone was groping her way down the steps, down into darkness which seemed to part as she advanced.

At the bottom of the flight, which consisted of twelve steps by silent count, the girl found herself in a rayless chamber, one of whose walls was at her right hand.

Leone paused awhile for breath, for the air was not as pure as that which she had just left. She knew not where she was, whether she was in a narrow corridor or in a subterranean room of some dimensions.

When she moved on at length she kept her hand against the wall, which was rough like stucco in places.

"I may walk into a pit at any moment!" she said to herself. "There may be a thousand pitfalls under the house of mystery; but the ground beneath my feet is solid and seems to have been trodden before."

It was not long before Leone found she was gradually descending into the earth and that the place she was in was a corridor and not a chamber.

All at once the corridor turned to the right, then the path ascended a little.

Leone's curiosity increased as the puzzle grew deeper.

At last the girl stopped and looked back,

Why need she look? She could not pierce the darkness the length of her arm.

During her underground journey she had made many turns which had quite bewildered her. To go back might be to miss the stairs, to proceed onward might carry her deeper into the subterranean labyrinth which seemed to have as many corridors as a spider's web has threads.

"On! on!" cried the girl to herself. "I told Buzzard Belt there should be no turning back till the mystery was solved, and there shall be none!" and shutting her lips once more with firmness behind a sentence she went on, deeper into the lure.

All at once a light burst upon her sight.

It was not bright, but soft like the glow of a lamp on a ceiling, and Leone, who had turned a new corner, pushed on with an exclamation of joy.

In a little while she was looking down into a chamber and upon a scene that astonished her.

The light which she had seen came from several large jets of fire that issued from pipes protruding beyond a wall. On the floor lay masses of rock, and all the implements of gold mining.

There were piles of picks, heavy iron shovels, and massive crowbars. Enough for fifty men, Leone thought.

In the wall opposite the place where she stood, an opening seemed to lead elsewhere; into another gold-cave perhaps.

A stairway led from Leone's position to the bottom of the mine, and when she believed that no one was near, she went down and stood in the full glare of the lights.

Everything indicated that the heaped picks and crowbars had only been abandoned for a time. The handles of the former had been worn smooth by human hands, and the walls showed evidences of recent attacks.

Leone noticed everything in the chamber before she entered the opening which led she knew not whither.

"I am on the trail of the Grandee's secret!" she exclaimed, and a moment later she was moving down a narrow way, near each wall of which was a smooth iron track which stretched into darkness.

At a sudden turn of the corridor Leone again faced a light and presently emerged into another chamber.

"The quartz-crushers!" rung from the young girl's lips as her eyes caught sight of several huge machines, whose counterparts she had seen in more than one gold and silver camp.

They stood silent and motionless, and about them rested several stout cars, used for bringing quartz to the mills over the tramway.

Leone was in the heart of a gold-mine fitted with all the modern machinery for getting the precious metal from the native ore. She had discovered the secret for which Bradd Brownell had enslaved Condor City. She now knew why he had built the palace on the hill, and why no strangers, not his friends, were admitted beyond its doors!

Her heart beat fast.

What would Buzzard Belt not give for this discovery.

The thought of the California Sleuth sent Leone forward with a cry.

What was happening at that moment in the camp? How long had she been exploring the underground gold labyrinth? What if the slaves of the nabob should return and find her in the mine?

Urged forward by these startling mental questions Leone turned back.

She climbed the stairway and plunged into the darkness again.

After a long trip, she saw a light, and hastened toward it.

It was the gold-room once more.

She was lost!

CHAPTER XXI.

FACING HIS FOES.

As we know by the sight witnessed by Leone from the window of the golden web, Buzzard Belt, or Crimson Claude, as we can with propriety call him, had not fled from impending fate.

After the death of Monte and the confrontation on the plaza, he had gone back to his cabin, where he had slept as peacefully as though nothing had happened to place his life in jeopardy.

He knew the men by whom he was surrounded. It needed no one to tell him that they were Bradd Brownell's slaves, and that the jury who would sit on the case would be "packed" in every sense of the word.

Monte had failed with his mission.

He had come as a robber to secure the paper, which had passed from Lasso Pete's hands into the sleuth's. More than this, he had come from the gold palace, and at the nabob's command; there was no doubt of this.

And now that Monte had failed, losing his life in the play, vengeance was to be had under a thin guise of law.

"These fellows are fools!" ejaculated the California Sleuth, looking out upon the men who had come to guard him. "I am not going to run away. I told Leone that I would not de-

sert her, and I will not. She does not know what has happened. It was the unforeseen. Bradd Brownell wanted what he will never get—the last words of Lasso Pete, the man he hated. I'm not as near the noose as he, in his triumph, thinks me. Despite his white slaves and his power here, he may learn before another sunset that there is many a slip 'twixt cup and lip. Ha! ha! my old Denver plunderer, there is more to be avenged than the robbery that beggared Gold Dresden two years ago.

As the sun came up and rode the clear autumn skies that hung over Condor City, the gold camp became alive as it were.

Men were seen everywhere on the streets, and it took no second look to tell that all were armed and ready for any emergency.

It was early in the morning when a man appeared at the door of Diamond Dart's cabin and burst in without the usual ceremony of a knock.

Diamond Dart was discussing a frugal breakfast of cold viands, and at sight of the caller, who was known in camp as Antonio Abe, he manifested a good deal of surprise.

The caller seemed more astonished than the tenant of the shanty. He halted just beyond the threshold and looked wildly around.

As the reader knows, Abe had called for the purpose of hunting up the stranger who had been seen to enter the cabin during the darkness just passed. In other words, Nicholas Norway.

Diamond Dart instantly guessed the man's mission.

"Was that fellow an acquaintance o' yours?" he asked.

Antonio Abe looked nonplused.

"What fellar?" he exclaimed.

"Why the tramp genius who war in Condor last night," Diamond went on.

"Was he here?"

"Yes. He saw a light in my shanty late at night, and the first thing I knowed hyer he war tryin' ter make out that we war pards some years ago on Eel River. I didn't know 'im, of course, an' sayin' that he would stir up some old pards in Condor, off he went."

Diamond Dart spoke in a manner that completely hoodwinked Abe.

"Yes, I war huntin' him," said the nabob's spy. "We don't want the likes o' him in camp. Which way did he go?"

"He talked about Shasta Gulch next. He's travelin' on his cheek, which is harder nor quartz. He made nothin' hyer. I'm no spring chicken, Abe!" and while Diamond Dart laughed Antonio Abe thought it a good time to withdraw, which he did.

Diamond Dart sprung to the window and watched the man out of sight; then with a grin of delight he turned away and raised one of the planks that formed the floor of the cabin.

"They got onter you, as I thought they would!" he said, down the shaft-like opening thus brought into view.

"Who called?" came up the shaft.

"Antonio Abe, who is a spy for Bradd Brownell. I told him without bein' asked that a tramp had given me a call and that he left ostensibly for Shasta Gulch."

"All of which the galoot swallowed, eh?"

"Yes."

"By Jupiter! you're a jewel, Diamond!" and a laugh followed the exclamation up the shaft. What's the outlook in Condor just now?"

"I can't tell yet. The boys are gatherin' about the plaza. Do you hear anything down there?"

"Not a sound."

"The nabob's slaves have shut off work for the present. If we could get into the palace what a picnic we'd have; but we can't do that now."

"Are you going to the trial?"

"Yes. I want to see what becomes of Buzzard Belt, or, Crimson Claude, as you call him."

"If Bradd got my message, there's no hope for him."

"There war none before. I might have another unexpected visitor, so I guess you'd better stay whar you ar'."

"This ain't a palace by a thousand miles!" ejaculated Nick at the bottom of the shaft. As I don't want to be picked up and dragged before the old captain just now, I'll hang on to it for awhile. See everything that happens on the plaza, for I want a full report."

"You shall have it!" was the answer, and the next minute Nick was left to himself again in the depths of the earth.

The shaft below his cabin had long been a secret which Diamond Dart had shared with no one, and he knew that Nick was entirely safe there from the keenest eyes in Condor City.

After awhile he left the cabin and sauntered leisurely toward the plaza, which was full of life.

He was anxious to see the outcome of the affray which had cost Monte his life.

Besides, Diamond had no love for Buzzard Belt, and none especially since Nick had told him that the man was a detective, a member of a class of people whom the toughs of Condor never liked.

Bradd Brownell was not to be seen when Diamond reached the square.

Everywhere he saw the dark-faced men who stood ready to do the bidding of the nabob on the hill. He knew them all, and while his position in Condor City had somewhat ostracised him, he could not call one an avowed enemy.

Facing the plaza on the west was a cabin larger than its neighbors. Its front was adorned with a porch which ran the whole length of the building, and which was a favorite resort of the mountain toughs at certain hours in the summer time.

"Bring forth the prisoner!" suddenly said a voice which rung in Diamond's ears, and a slight turn brought him face to face with Bradd Brownell who stood between two of the wooden columns.

The nabob of Condor had dressed himself for the occasion. His face was cleanly shaven to the raven mustache that drooped over his mouth, and his long black locks had been brushed back until they fell over and hid his snowy collar. Tall and handsome in the close-fitting suit of dark clothes, he looked like a man of wealth and leisure. A pair of eyes full of curbed animation nestled beneath the wide rim of his sombrero.

Diamond saw the three brilliant rings he always wore on his left hand, and he knew that under the velvet displayed to his gaze were the claws of as cool a tiger as ever lived.

"The ball is going to open now," muttered Diamond Dart when he saw three men leave the plaza after the command which had just been spoken. "The gold spider is in a humor to crush the fly who is in his web. But we shall see!"

In a little while there appeared four men on the east side of the square.

Buzzard Belt and the guard that had been sent after him!

The crowd had been drawn to the porched cabin as if by mutual consent, and Diamond Dart found himself on the outside watching the course of events.

"Thar's no weakenin' in his eyes!" he ejaculated when he caught sight of the California Sleuth into whose face Bradd Brownell was already looking. "But pshaw! saltpeter won't save him in a den of lions like this."

Buzzard Belt came forward with the three men, and presently the quartette halted before the crowd on and before the porch.

"Where is the dead? We want him here," said the Shasta nabob.

Several minutes later four men came forward bearing on a blanket the stalwart figure of Monte, and in response to a wave of Bradd's jeweled hand their burden was placed on the ground near the porch.

Buzzard Belt looked once at his victim and then straightened and turned his eyes away.

"You know what all this means," suddenly exclaimed the gold king, looking at the man whose attitude proclaimed a prisoner. "The hour for trial has arrived. You killed the man lying yonder. I believe you do not deny it?"

"I killed the man called Monte," was the answer. "He came masked to my cabin last night and demanded something which I would not surrender."

The Shasta king gave a slight start.

He knew what the detective meant, for had he not sent Monte after the prize which had cost him his life.

"Under what name do you wish to be tried?" asked Bradd. "Are you Buzzard Belt from Sonoma, or Crimson Claude the California Sleuth-hound?"

There were several ejaculations of wonder among the men and an instant craning of necks forward.

The mine king had spoken a revelation.

"Just as you wish," answered Buzzard Belt, with a smile that puzzled the chief. "You can give me any name you wish and proceed with the trial."

What did this mean?

The prisoner of Condor had not shown the slightest surprise at the startling question.

After all he was mere Buzzard Belt, and not the person mentioned in the morning which had been found at the palace door.

"We'll try you as Buzzard Belt," replied Bradd. "The names of thirty-six men have been written on separate slips and placed in Bodie Bluff's hat. Any man you may select will draw twelve out, and they will be the jurors. Are you satisfied?"

"Suit yourselves," was the answer, as the smile seemed to deepen at the detective's mouth.

The next moment a hatless man came forward and at the mention of another name he was followed by another who raised his hand over the hat the first man held.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Buzzard Belt, throwing up his hand as the first juror was about to be drawn. "I want one word with Captain Bradd of Condor City. After that the trial can proceed to the close."

A singular light took possession of the nabob's eyes; he flushed in patches and fixed his eyes on the man who had stepped from his guards and was coming forward.

"What is it, sir?" exclaimed Bradd. "This is an open court. We have no secrets here."

Buzzard Belt was not checked by these words.

He came forward with his eyes riveted on the Condor king, and Bradd met him motionless and pale.

All at once the detective's hand flew out and closed on the nabob's wrist; then the next moment he drew him forward, and for a second his lips were seen to move at his ear.

"Now go on with the trial!" he said, aloud, stepping back.

CHAPTER XXII.

FROM TRAGEDY TO FARCE.

BRADD BROWNELL stepped away and looked at the California Sleuth; the crowd looked at him.

There was no sign of victory in the prisoner's face. He stood before the interested spectators with a calm countenance and a figure proudly erect.

The king of the secret mine seemed rooted to the spot.

What would he do?

All at once he turned on his heel and walked back into the porched cabin.

From there a message came out for Antonio Abe.

"What did you find out at Diamond Dart's shanty? You've been there?" asked Bradd as the miner-sport entered the room.

"Yes; I went—"

"And found what?"

"Diamond Dart at breakfast," was the reply.

"Nothing more?—nothing about the man Stormy Steve saw last night."

"He had been thar. Diamond Dart called him a tramp who wanted ter 'pard' him. He talked of going on ter Shasta Gulch."

Bradd seemed to exhibit some disappointment.

"The man out there—" he began nodding toward the door, but he did not get any further.

Antonio Abe waited respectfully but with a good deal of impatience for him to proceed, but he was not rewarded.

At last he ventured to speak.

"Are we going on with the trial, boss?" he asked.

"We? No!"

Abe recoiled before the words and the look that accompanied them, and before he could recover the Gold Grandee turned and strode back to the porch.

"I postpone this trial," he exclaimed hardly lifting his eyes to the waiting and thunderstruck crowd.

A murmur of rage and chagrin followed the announcement.

What had happened?

Was Buzzard Belt to go clear with the blood of Monte on his hands? And after all the gold king's preparations for doom, his threats, and his looks?

He was the law of Condor City, he could condemn and set free, and in proof of this he had virtually freed the man foredoomed by hatred and revenge.

The trial was postponed! This meant that there would never be any trial.

The bronze men gathered in front of the porch felt this and bit their lips.

The unexpected *denouement* surprised them more than any other could have done.

It was next to incredible.

They all looked at Buzzard Belt as the decree fell from Bradd's tongue.

The eyes of the two men had not met since the parting, they did not meet now.

There was the faintest semblance of a smile at the corners of the detective's mouth. For the first time since his appearance on the plaza his eyes sparkled.

"At any time, gentlemen!" he exclaimed touching the brim of his hat to the crowd as the nabob with ashen face and teeth firm-set walked back into the house, and while the bearded toughs heard he left his guards and retired.

There was something exasperating to the crowd in the mysterious triumph which Buzzard Belt had scored.

The corpse on the blanket seemed to reproach them. They were letting Monte go unavenged and all because his slayer had whispered something at the gold king's ear.

Before Buzzard Belt passed from sight there was an ominous fingering of revolver butts, but nothing came of it, and he was permitted to go scot free.

The expected tragedy had turned out to be a farce. At least this was the way Condor City viewed it.

What had become of Bradd Brownell?

Almost before Buzzard Belt had disappeared he was going up the hill toward the palace.

He had passed through the porched cabin, and by keeping it between him and the crowd, was getting away unobserved.

If he was going over his failure to condemn the California sport he did not give vent to his thoughts in audible words, but it was evident from his looks that his mind was busy.

Once in the palace he went straight to the library.

"Struck by a thunderbolt and rendered powerless!" were the first words that came over his lips. "In God's name, why didn't I make a play in the dark? I thought I had him in

my hand, but he slips out. When I am about to noose him by the verdict of a jury of my own choosing, he comes forward and with the coolness of Satan whispers a few words which give him the game! It is a dynamite bomb. He did not start when I mentioned that he might be Crimson Claude. He cannot be that man for I watched him like a hawk while I spoke. Who is he?

"By Jupiter if Shadow Simon finds the black-eyed viper, I have a chance," he went on, having paused to empty a glass of liquor that lent a snap to his eyes. "He is in league with that woman and she left Condor before daylight, for what? But I still hold the real prize. Leone the lily of Shasta is in the web I have been spinning for years in this country—almost from the night I broke Gold Dresden alias Sir Harold Harcourt in Denver. Ah! I wonder how the girl has contented herself, and how she will receive the news of *his* reprieve?"

Bradd Brownell left the room and mounted the steps.

"Not here?" he ejaculated, opening a door on the next floor. "Maybe my mountain bird is feeling the bars of her golden cage."

He went from room to room in search of Leone, but his hunt was not rewarded.

His last place was the gold-room, but she was not there.

"All the avenues to the mine were shut against her!" he exclaimed, puzzled over his failure to find the girl. "If she has escaped—But she has not! It is impossible!" and he went back to the library in no good mood.

There he waited with keen impatience for the return of some one.

At the first noise he reached out his hand and jerked a green cord that hung over the table.

The next moment there was a shuffling of feet beyond one of the doors, and a man came in.

It was Roscoe, next to Monte, now dead, his best man.

Bradd was impatient to talk.

"What do they say?" he asked, looking from the depths of his chair into Roscoe's face.

"They don't like it very much."

"I thought so."

"They're likely to serve him a trick."

The nabob's eyes got a sudden flash of pleasure but it faded as quickly.

"I can't afford to let them go on," he said, speaking slowly.

"Then the fellow has a hand you didn't count on?"

"My God! yes! And such a hand, too! There's not another like it in California!"

Roscoe was silent. He wanted information, he burned to know all, but some unseen force held him back.

"Go and search the palace for Leone!" suddenly said Bradd, waving his man away.

"What! can't you find her?"

"No."

"She can't leave the cage without assistance."

"She had no one to assist her," was the answer. "When you have found her come back here. I want to send a message by you down to camp."

Roscoe departed, and the king of the secret bonanza was alone again.

Leaving his chair he went to the nearest wall and opened a secret panel.

The place thus revealed was large enough to admit a man's hand, but longer than wide. Suspended from the top hung a wire, to the end of which was fastened a wooden handle.

"I don't think I'll have to use it," ejaculated Bradd, looking at this simple device. "But I am prepared for an emergency all the same. What if the man lied? But, no. He could know nothing about what he mentioned, and lie!" and the nabob shut the panel and went back to his chair.

It seemed an age before Roscoe came back.

His countenance spoke his report before his lips uttered a word.

"Well, you did not find her?"

"No."

"She could not have reached the mine?"

"I found the brown door unlocked."

"Ho!" and the gold king almost left his chair.

"If she has found the mine—if her girlish curiosity has discovered the bonanza secret, her life ends within the walls of the palace."

Roscoe listened without making a reply.

"The men were not to return to work any more to-day," Bradd went on. "We can search the mine for the girl. If we find her in possession of the secret, the rest need never know it. The bonanza is like the streets of Condor City to us. Are the flames of the work-room on?"

"Yes; we left them so."

"Come, then. To the bonanza! I don't want a girl to possess the secret before the time has come. And that girl, too, after the farce Buzzard Belt made me play on the plaza!"

The next minute the library was entirely deserted, and two men were moving down a subterranean corridor and over the same ground lately traveled by Leone.

Meanwhile the plaza in front of the porched cabin held a crowd of bronzed men, who discussed the one subject that Condor City had known for ten hours and the only one.

This was the killing of Monte, who had been

carried back to his cabin and prepared for burial during the coming night in the little cemetery on the mountain-side.

The men hung over a certain unplanned counter in the cabin, and said many things in low tones about Crimson Claude.

They wanted revenge.

The postponement of the trial meant acquittal as plainly as if Bradd Brownell had proclaimed it.

Monte had been pard and friend to all.

They did not stop to think that Buzzard Belt's accusation of robbery might be true; they had not witnessed the fatal affray as Nick Norway had. Not one of them had seen the shot which the Californian had fired in self-defense, when the dead man's hand was at the trigger.

Even had they known these things they would not have dammed the channel of vengeance.

"We kin do what ther cap'n seems afraid ter!" was an expression heard every now and then among the men in and about the cabin. "King Bradd won't hang anybody if Buzzard Belt takes a long journey an' never comes back. Wal, I guess not!"

"He never war one o' us, anyhow! He stuck ter Lasso Pete for a sartain purpose an' Bradd seems ter hev got ahead o' him thar!" And a smile went round the crowd for the last words were understood as alluding to Leone.

Thus while the gold nabob and his lieutenant were looking for the girl in the depths of the secret mine, a new net of doom was being woven for the Californian.

At last six men, all stalwart fellows whose eyes spoke some desperate purpose, withdrew from the main gang and went away.

Those who witnessed the departure knew that something was up, and that everything was against Crimson Claude.

The six men came back one by one and mingled with the crowd again.

In a little while the word "to-night" ran from man to man, and eyes got a new fire under its whispered influence.

"By glory! ef I war *him* I'd leave Condor at once ef I went ter Tartarus!" ejaculated a big fellow at the counter.

The pards of Condor City were going to take up their master's quarrel, and woe to Buzzard Belt if something did not turn up in his favor.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MAN WHO WAS NOT "FLEECEED."

At the mouth of a certain gulch some sixty miles south of Condor City began the struggling mining-camp which owned the name of Owlet Ranch.

It was not large, not more than thirty cabins and poor ones at that, and its inhabitants were, for the most part, a lot of shiftless fellows who lived by hook and crook, ransacking the adjacent hills for gold, and gambling with each other for the results of their labor.

Into this place on the same day that witnessed the events we have just left at Condor City rode a black-eyed and handsome woman.

Her eyes were restless and on the alert; she saw everything that presented itself for inspection, and it soon became evident that she had not come to see any of Owlet's citizens.

She rode up to the first man she sighted, a big indolent fellow who, pipe in mouth, was taking a siesta on the sunny side of a cabin.

The fellow's eyes got a new light when they saw the woman.

"By Jove! thar's a seraph from Eden!" he ejaculated. "And alone, too!" and he waited impatiently for the woman to declare herself.

The visitor drew rein within a few feet of the mountain lounge, and with her eyes fixed upon him, she leaned toward the cabin.

"This is Owlet?" she asked, by way of an introduction, though she looked able to answer the question herself.

"Bet your beauty!" was the response. "This is ther only all-wool paradise in Shasta-land—Owlet Ranch, my Eden empress. Whar might you be from?"

"From everywhere," smiled the woman, replying in the strain inaugurated by the man. "Goin' ter bask in our smiles awhile, eh?"

"Not for long. I'm following a friend, who must be here now."

"The man, hey?"

"Yes."

"Well, he came in early in ther day an' got in with Jack Sands an' his crowd."

The answer seemed to give the woman a little uneasiness.

"Mebbe you don't know Jack?" the lounge went on. "Wal, he's ther boss deck-manipulator o' Owlet. When he sees a victim he pounces on him like a hawk on a pigeon, an' he don't leave him either till he hasn't got a feather left. I war a pigeon once," and the speaker grinned. "I haven't had a mite of plumage since, consequently I don't afford Jack any amusement, nor hev any myself."

The woman in the saddle heard the man through with a good deal of impatience.

"I don't think they'll get to pluck the man I want to see," she remarked.

"Wal, he's with 'em."

"In which cabin?" asked the woman.

"In ther last one down yonder—in ther biggest shanty in Owlet."

"Thanks," and she gathered up the lines and prepared to leave.

"Say! would you mind ter tell Tom Dowling what butterfly he's gazed upon?" suddenly asked the man.

"No, indeed," smiled the woman. "I am Sybil, from Condor City."

"Whar one man owns a hundred!" exclaimed the Owlet sport.

The exclamation, or something else, made the woman's lips meet firmly.

"He owns a hundred men, body and soul!" she hissed, leaning suddenly toward the wall-flower; but there is one woman he couldn't buy with the globe!"

"That's you, my daisy! Ho! ho! I call you a seraph, all wool, an' a yard wide!" cried Tom Dowling, and jerking off his hat he sent it spinning into the air, followed by a shout loud enough to rouse one-half of the camp.

Leaving him to himself, Sybil rode away with her eyes regarding the cabin to which she had been directed.

"Jack Sands and his party won't find any fleece on the lamb they want to shear," she mentally ejaculated. "There was a time when they would have found him a profitable victim, but then there was no Owlet, and the fleecers were operating in other fields. Thank Heaven, I have found *him*, and the shadow who followed me has been left behind for the wolf and the vulture!"

As the Owlet loafer had told Sybil, the cabin toward which she guided her horse was the largest structure in the camp.

It stood at one end of the straggling street, and had what no other cabin possessed—two windows, a luxury at Owlet Ranch.

The door was closed when Silver Sybil rode up, but her ears were quick to catch the sound of voices inside.

"You mean you think Owlet won't play fair," cried a rough voice at that moment. "Thar's more honor hyer than you'll find anywhar else in ther hull Shasta kentry. A man from Yuba generally carries enou h for amusement. We don't want travelin' misers in these parts. No, siree!"

"I have told you that I am without so much as a dollar," was the reply, couched in milder tones, and evidently from a person of some refinement. "There was a time when I could have played you a month at a stretch for heavy stakes."

"We want no reference ter past bonanzas!" rung out the coarse, rough voice again. "You don't leave Owlet till you've indulged us in a quiet game."

There was a threat in the last sentence, a threat so poorly concealed that Sybil's eyes flashed at it, and she seemed about to dash open the door.

"Very well; you can't play without stakes. I have none to put on the board."

A moment's silence followed.

"We'll see what you have. Stand against the door, Clearspring. I'll go through this Yuba pigeon like water through a gold-dust sieve!"

At that instant Silver Sybil stepped slipped from the saddle. She did not seem to have touched the ground when she was at the door!

The woman had the agility of a mountain lioness.

The next moment she threw herself against the door, and it flew open.

Several dark-shirted and bearded men started back at her appearance—one, in particular, who was about to throw himself upon a person who had shrunk almost to the cabin wall.

"Ah! come here, captain!" exclaimed Sybil, meeting the look of the threatened man. "You will step back and give the gentleman free passage to the door, Mr. Sands."

Her eyes had singled out the chief rough of the group, and he bit his lips under his beard while he glared at her like a tiger unexpectedly deprived of a meal.

They did not want to give their victim up; that was plain.

"Who ar' you an' whar—"

"I am Silver Sybil, at present from Condor!" was the interruption.

"Ho!" cried Jack Sands. "From Condor, an' ther Gold Grandee's slave!"

The woman flushed indignant.

"Captain Mystery, there, can answer for me!" she exclaimed. "But the insinuation needs no answer."

At this moment the gambler's victim moved forward, and Jack Sands threw up his hand.

"You'd better not, Jack. Thar's suthin' in ther seraph's grip," whispered a pair of lips at the desperado's ear, and Jack, not looking to confirm the statement, dropped his hand and stepped back.

The disappointed toughs were obliged to see the man called Captain Mystery walk unfleece from their clutches.

When he reached the door where Sybil stood waiting for him, the tiger voice of Jack Sands broke out again.

"Mebbe we don't intend ter stand this kind o' work in Owlet!" he cried. "Thet man thought ter find hyer his old acquaintance, Major Sono-

ma; but ther major left months ago. You two had better hunt more congenial quarters. We run this mountain ranch, an' when a chap won't accommodate us with a little game, *we* go through him like quicksilver. Thet's ther style hyer whar Jack Sands is boss!"

"You shall not be troubled with our presence," replied Sybil, and she seemed to take delight in giving Jack look for look with a good deal added for interest. "I find there are cowards here as well as in Condor. Good-by, gentlemen!"

The black-eyed woman turned toward her horse and caught the bridle.

"When did you come?" asked Captain Mystery, bewildered.

"A while ago—and in the nick of time, too, it seems."

"Heavens, yes! My friend, Major Sonoma, is gone, and I fell into the hands of Jack Sands and his fleecers. You got the message I left in the log?"

"And the verbal one delivered by the boy, Mardo."

Captain Mystery gave a start and uttered a cry of surprise.

"I gave the boy no message!" he exclaimed. Silver Sybil laughed.

"I begin to see through the little plot that failed," she ejaculated.

"Mardo was playing a game for some one else—for Shadow Simon? Ah, yes, for that cunning rascal!"

"Where is he?"

"Where the wolves and the vultures will find the wretch!" cried Sybil. "But I have something to say to you, but not here. I don't want to tempt Jack Sands and his boon companions. Get your horse."

Five minutes later Captain Mystery was well mounted at Sybil's side, and watched by a group of baffled men, the pair rode out of camp.

"Now," suddenly said the woman drawing rein where there was no one to watch or to listen. "Bradd Brownell has showed his hand."

Already Captain Mystery was watching her intently, but he started at mention of the Gold Grandee's name.

"Lasso Pete is dead," she went on. "I am going to give it to you in a nut-shell. He left the girl Leone to his pard, Buzzard Belt, who has proved unworthy of the trust. The child is now in the gold web, forced thither by her new guardian who all along has been Bradd Brownell's slave like the rest of Condor!"

Captain Mystery's brow darkened with disappointment.

"Have you trusted anybody whom I have mentioned?" asked Sybil.

"Yes."

"His name."

"Buzzard Belt."

"Well, there isn't a drop of honest blood in his veins!" was the reply. "He's like all the rest, I say, else why has he turned the child over to the Shasta Grandee?"

"That man," said Captain Mystery, "that man a traitor? I can't believe it!"

Sybil was watching him all the time like a hawk.

"I think you might tell me now," she suddenly resumed. "I think the times demand it. Buzzard Belt has promised to assist you in some way?"

"Yes!" cried Captain Mystery. "I took his oath in Denver just after the man called Edwin Alden had robbed me of the money I had toiled for that I might put the best detectives in this country on the trail of my lost wife and child. He swore to make my cause his; he promised to hunt the robber down and to solve the mystery that enshrouds the fate of Lady Harcourt and her daughter. I saw him a few days ago; he came down to Yuba to see me, but he didn't give me much satisfaction. He wants to discover the Harcourt trail he says; he has found the Denver thief who is now called Bradd Brownell."

"What of the girl, Leone? I am interested in her!" exclaimed Sybil.

Captain Mystery shook his head. "I know nothing about her," he replied.

"But your man—your detective—has sold her to the Grandee! It is infamous! What was he called when you hired him?"

"Crimson Claude."

"Well, I don't trust him; you may! I came to take you up there."

"To Condor City?"

"To the lair of the lion! You and I can win a battle against Bradd Brownell. I want to get even with that infamous sport!"

Sybil's words were couched in a hiss.

"What is he to you? You have never told me."

"Pardon me, but I cannot tell you now," was the response. "I say that your California spotter is playing for the man who made you a bankrupt in Denver. I know it."

Captain Mystery, or Sir Harold Harcourt, grew pale, and seemed to reel in the saddle.

"His oath! It was taken in good faith," he ejaculated. "If he has deserted me, then I shall despair. I will never trust my fellow-man again. Oh, God! shall the Harcourt mystery never be unraveled in the light?"

"It shall be! It is in the grasp of Bradd Brownell, and he is in Condor City. The time has come for you to appear on the ground."

Captain Mystery clinched his hands.

"I will go with you!" he cried to Sybil.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MESSAGE OF DEATH.

"If I can force this man back to Condor City I shall crush the gold palace like a house of cards!" passed through Sybil's mind, and when she heard Captain Mystery declare himself ready to follow, her heart throbbed with intense joy.

His words were pledge enough; he would go back with her.

In a little while Sybil and the man were riding north over the same trail which had brought the woman to Owlet Ranch.

There was victory mingled with passion in her eyes; the fire in his burned low.

Suddenly she turned to him and laid one of her perfect, full-veined and very beautiful hands, on his arm.

"Why not tell me the whole story now?" she said, looking into his face. "We do not want to enter Condor during the day, and we can time our journey perfectly. Go back to the first."

"If it will interest you, I will," he answered with a faint smile.

"I would like to hear it."

"I am Sir Harold Harcourt, of Harcourt Place, England," he began, speaking with a certain pride. "Eighteen years ago I was considered happy, because I had a lovely wife, and our little child was just learning to lisp my name. It is true, I must confess, that Lady Harcourt had a temper not at all times congenial, but I humored her much and was always ready to overlook her little flights of anger and her petty jealousies. We had many friends, all among the nobility, and the doors of Harcourt Place stood open at all times to every one."

"At last I discovered by the merest accident that Lady Harcourt had received letters from a man who was a former suitor. This person had always been my enemy, and if living to-day he, Robert Graham, is my enemy still. It happened that when I made the discovery to which I refer Lady Harcourt was in one of her pets of ill-humor, and I accused her at the wrong moment for my future peace of mind. She laughed at me and taunted me in a manner which led me to believe that she had encouraged the correspondence. There was a scene in Harcourt Place that day to which I do not like to refer."

"Let it pass," said Sybil, who was watching the man closely and not losing a word of the narrative.

"That night I went to London for the purpose of meeting Robert Graham, but the rascal was not to be found. Neither could I find his fast friend, a fellow named Nick Norway. Both had disappeared as if the earth had opened and engulfed them. I was not very anxious to go back with my anger at its height. I waited till I was myself again. The next day I returned."

"Alone?"

"Alone, though they tried to make out afterward that I was accompanied by a disreputable character of London. It was an infamous slander! When I got home I made a discovery that sickened me. Lady Harcourt was gone and the cradle in the nurse's room was without its tenant. I first thought my wife had fled in her pet to her brother whose estate joined mine, but that hope proved a delusion. The servants, with one exception, knew nothing. The exception was the second butler, a man who had an infirmity that kept him awake through the night. He said that at twelve o'clock a carriage came to a certain spot on the grounds and that two men walked to the house. In a little while they came back accompanied by a woman, and one of the men carried something in his arms. The butler declined to interfere fearing that one of the men was Lady Harcourt's brother. That is all anybody saw. My wife and child disappeared that night. If the hand of God had blotted them from life the disappearance would not have been more more complete. Of course I did not yield them up. From the moment of the discovery of the flight, I began a chase which is on to this day. Then I had plenty of money at my command and I used it for the one purpose."

"All the time some unseen hand baffled me. It threw my detectives off the scent. One day I would get a letter that Lady Harcourt was dead, the next there would come a message saying that she was living happily with a man whom she could love. I disbelieved both reports. At one time I had ten detectives employed, and in different parts of the world. All this took money, and now in the end Harcourt Place went at a sacrifice."

"At last the opposition—I call it such because I was opposed in every move—brought forth a charge that threatened to complete my ruin. Some human bones found under an old game-keeper's lodge were claimed to be those of Lady Harcourt and her child. I was arraigned for murder, and it took my last guineas to clear myself of the monstrous charge. After that I left

England. My best detective thought he had found a faint clew in America, and this country became my goal."

"What of Robert Graham and his confederate all this time?" asked Sybil, eagerly, as Captain Mystery paused.

"Graham never came back to London. He disappeared two days before the catastrophe at Harcourt Place. Nick Norway returned, but before my agents could lay hands on him he was off again. I instructed my detectives to hunt for the two rascals as much as for my family, and I believe they did so. I am confident that the secret of the strange disappearance rests in the hearts of those two men. In America I found nothing. The clew my detective thought he had, proved he had no clew at all when tested, and I found myself stranded on a strange shore."

"Somehow or other my presence in New York got into the papers, and I became a marked man. Don't you see the unseen hand was still against me? From New York I came West, intending, if possible, to make enough money to resume the hunt of a lifetime. Fortune favored me. In Denver everything I touched seemed to turn to gold. There I went by the name of David Dresden, but 'Gold' Dresden was the nickname I obtained. When I was ready to turn back and resume the search I was rendered a beggar by the hand of one man—robbed deliberately of more than a hundred thousand dollars and all my valuable papers. Since then what have I been? You know in part," and Captain Mystery looked into the face of his solitary listener.

"I have been a wanderer, buffeted by fate and fortune," he suddenly went on. "Nearly every gold camp in the Wild West has heard of me. Here I go under one name, there under another. I set a detective, Crimson Claude, of California, on the trail of the man who robbed me in Denver, and he is still in my employ. After a long chase he has discovered, or says he has, that Edwin Alden the robber is Bradd Brownell of Condor City. But this does not clear up the mystery that hangs over wife and child. I don't care for money if it does not bring them back. You say that Bradd Brownell holds the secret! What secret? What does the gold nabob of Shasta know about the two I love?"

Sybil's eyes seemed to get an intenser light. She did not speak, but waited for him to go on as if it did her good to hear him talk.

"If we go back to Condor—and we are going thither—what will we gain?" he continued. "You admit that *he* owns the men there like a master owns his slaves. They will all be against us. The doors of the palace will not open to Gold Dresden, and a woman cannot force them. The girl, Leone, is nothing to me! If Buzzard Belt my detective, helped her into Bradd Brownell's power, it was for a purpose, and he said that he would do nothing not for the cause he served."

A sneer came to Silver Sybil's lips.

"You trust that man, but I don't!" she exclaimed. "Well, never mind! Do you think now, after eighteen years, that Lady Harcourt really loved Robert Graham?"

"No, a thousand times no!" he exclaimed. "He was a rascal born; she a lady from birth! Their blood could not commingle. It was a vile, a villainous abduction. I have never wronged Lady Harcourt so much as to think that she loved that man."

"I am glad to hear you speak thus," answered Sybil, and then she continued, but in a sadder strain; "I fear, though, that your wife will never tell the story of that night's mystery."

He started.

"You mean that she is dead!" he cried.

"Remember that eighteen years have passed away. That period is a lifetime."

"It has seemed two lifetimes to me!" was the response. "Of late I have not had many hopes of finding Lady Harcourt alive, but my child?"

"There is hope for her," replied Sybil.

"She would be nearly nineteen now!"

"With no marks by which she could be identified?"

"There used to be one, but time may have obliterated that."

"What is it?"

"A scar on her right arm between elbow and shoulder. The nurse let fall a knife and cut her there."

"She told me that."

Silver Sybil started at the sound of her own voice for she had unconsciously spoken aloud.

In a moment she was looking at Captain Mystery whose eyes seemed ready to start from his head. His face had no color.

"Who told you?—and what?" he suddenly cried, darting toward her. "In God's name, woman, what have you been keeping from me?"

His hand had clutched her arm and the bloodless fingers were closing in like the talons of an eagle.

Conscious that she had made a balk, Sybil shrunk to the utmost limit of his arm and seemed to collect her scattered thoughts.

The horses were near together moving at a walk over the trail which was bordered on either side by rock and tree making a scene wildly picturesque.

"You know something! You have been keep-

ing it back!" he went on. "Now I conjure you to go on and tell the truth!"

By this time Sybil was cool again.

"What did I say?" she asked.

"You said that somebody told you about the scar on my child's arm, and that was a secret not known beyond the precincts of Harcourt Place."

"Ah! I forgot!" smiled Sybil, but the next instant her face was sober again. "Somebody did tell me that. It was a woman whom I saw die ten years ago in Santa Fe."

"Well?"

Captain Mystery's breath went in gasps.

"I now know that she spoke the truth. You have confirmed her words. That woman was on the hunt of a child, a daughter."

The man dropped Sybil's arm and started back.

"She was Lady Harcourt. She was my wife!" he cried.

"She told me so at all events."

"Now for the child!" came in low but resolute tones from his lips. "Now for the baby, and vengeance!"

There was no answer and the two rode on in silence.

CHAPTER XXV.

A FATAL FOOTHOLD.

NIGHT was once more spreading her sable wings over Condor City.

The day, after the failure to condemn Crimson Claude, had passed without any striking events, but the very silence, the looks of the dark men who moved hither and thither, indicated the calm before the storm.

"I can't get over the California Sleuth's escape," exclaimed a man who looked into Diamond Dart's face in the light of a cabin lamp. "He was doomed when the court met. There wasn't the ghost of a chance for him, but he walks forward, whispers something at Bradd's ear, and presto! he goes free! There is some mystery here I don't understand."

"I guess it puzzles the whole camp," ejaculated Diamond Dart.

"You heard Bradd ask him whether he could not call him Crimson Claude?"

"I did, and I've told you that it never stirred him."

"But he is Claude," cried Nick Norway. "Didn't he tell me so to my teeth when he had walked me from Silver Sybil's cabin? But what did he whisper at Bradd's ear?"

Diamond Dart shook his head and smiled.

"You'll have to ask Bradd," he remarked.

"For a dollar I'd invade the gold palace and make a revelation."

The miner looked at Nick, deeply in doubt whether he was in earnest.

"Mebbe you'd better, after he made you promise to leave camp when you had blackmailed him to the tune of ninety-eight hundred dollars."

"By glory! the money was due me!" flashed the Prince of Bismarck. "Didn't he give me a package of money once which was seven thousand short? That was for my work in the Denver game that stripped Gold Dresden. I never got my share in the other scheme."

"What other scheme?"

"Why, the English one!" exclaimed Nick.

"I never heard of that. Go ahead."

But Nicholas Norway relapsed into silence and drew back.

He had gone far enough, and Diamond Dart saw that he had suddenly resolved to be more careful.

"I could fix it all up with him if I could get into the palace," Nick suddenly went on. "I never told him that he could not afford to indulge harsh measures toward me. I thought I would go quietly away with the hush money, but when I saw the interior of that house on the hill, the wealth there and all such things, I made up my mind that some shrewd playing would rake in bigger stakes. Look here, Diamond," and Nick leaned forward and laid one hand confidentially on the miner's arm, "I b'lieve I'll reconnoiter."

"About the palace?"

"Yes."

"You'd better save your neck."

"I'm no infant!" cried Nick. "If I see the coast clear I'll make an evening call."

"All right. Try it!" and Diamond Dart drew back and looked at his old Eel River pard. "You haven't seen the half of that house although you've crossed the threshold. If you think you're bullet or lasso-proof go ahead."

"But I know too much for Bradd Brownell to offer violence. I am the receptacle of more than one secret that he would not sell for another palace like the one he occupies. Then, if I can get established in the palace, I'll find out all about the noises we hear underground and some day we'll be the twin nabobs of the Shasta country. Don't you see, old pard?"

The picture painted by the Prince of Bismarck produced no enthusiasm in the man before him.

"Go ahead, I say," answered Diamond Dart in a voice exceedingly discouraging.

"I shall!" cried Nick. "I will discover everything. Bradd Brownell may open his eyes when he sees me, but I'll convince him that

he can't afford to spring any gold palace traps on this individual. I'll post him about the man he spared to-day. He shall know that Buzzard Belt is Crimson Claude the sleuth who has been watching him for months. I'll tighten the noose about the Californian's neck. I'm no cradled infant, Diamond; I cut my eye teeth on Eel River years ago!"

Five minutes later the owner of the little cabin was alone.

"Let the fool go!" he murmured when the door had closed softly on Nick Norway. "He'll not be in the palace ten minutes before he will wish he had never seen Condor City."

Let us follow the Prince of Bismarck.

If there was any one thing Nick Norway had set above another it was money.

We have already witnessed several of his feats for the almighty dollar, his cutting of the telegraph wires on the wild night in the Colorado gulch, and his demand on Bradd Brownell for nearly ten thousand dollars of hush money.

He walked from Diamond Dart's cabin straight to the house which crowned the hill, the wonder of California and the elegant mystery of the Shasta country.

Nobody seemed on guard.

About the premises hung an ominous silence, and the only light that struck the sport's eye was a gleam from one of the second story windows.

Nick wondered if Shadow Simon would greet him at the door as he did on a former occasion, and whether he would have to wait long in the library for Bradd.

There was an aggravating coolness about the mountain blackmailer's movements. He did not canvass defeat, but victory and the winning of another big stake by his finesse occupied his thoughts.

Nick knocked at the door with confidence in full possession, and then waited for a reply.

He was not unarmed, and the hand that knocked knew how to handle the revolvers he carried under his coat.

In a little while the knob before him was turned, and the door opened.

The warden was not Simon, as Nick could see at a glance, but a man Simon's superior in frame and with a keener eye.

"The captain. Important business," exclaimed Nick, stepping forward.

In a moment the warden canvassed him from head to foot.

Nick was not attired in the garb of a rough, but there clung to his clothes, here and there, some marks of the bottom of Diamond Dart's shaft.

"It is all right. Captain Bradd and I are old friends. I've been here before," and to the door-keeper's surprise Nick pushed his way inside and walked boldly toward the library.

"Wait, sir!" cried the bronzed warden, and a hand fell upon Nick's shoulder. "I go in there first!"

The Prince of Bismarck found himself halted at a door which he was about to open, and the mountain warden, with a terrible look, pushed him back and disappeared.

"I could choke that fellow!" ejaculated Nick. "If I get a foothold in this house, by Jupiter! I'll teach him manners."

The warden closed the door after him and stood in the presence of a man who seemed to be waiting for him with a good deal of impatience.

"Who was it, Roscoe?" asked this person, who was Bradd Brownell.

"A man—a stranger."

"What was he like?"

"He is just out there," and Roscoe glanced toward the door.

"Inside?"

"Yes."

The brow of the Gold Grandee instantly darkened.

"A certain fellow got inside once in spite of Simon," he cried. "Show him in."

As Roscoe turned to obey the command the Shasta nabob opened a drawer in the table at his right and took out an elegant silver-mounted six-shooter.

His eyes got a fierce light as he handled the beautiful weapon.

Then he leaned back in his chair and watched the door.

A minute passed away.

At the end of that time the portal opened and the light of the lamp fell upon Nick Norway as he came forward.

The Prince of Bismarck doffed his hat as he crossed the richly figured carpet. The gaze of the Gold Grandee was instantly centered upon him.

"You can go, Roscoe," said Bradd waving his hand to the warden who waited for further orders ready to obey them whatever they were.

Roscoe threw one more glance at Nick and vanished.

"I did not send for you," suddenly said the Shasta gold king.

"I know it, captain, but something made me feel that a chap war tryin' to hoodwink you hyer an' I turned back."

"Just as if we can't take care of ourselves!"

"After what happened on the plaza to-day—"

"There!" and the hand of the nabob went up

and broke Nick's sentence. "If you came hither to talk about that you will find no auditor."

"You don't want to know, then, that the man down there is one—"

"No! I don't care who he is!"

These words were spoken with a boldness that startled the Prince of Bismarck.

"By Jove! Bradd Brownell is playing a bluff game with his old pard!" he mentally ejaculated. "Shall I go back to the English card?"

"I thought you were going away," suddenly resumed the man in the gold web. "You took money enough from me the other night to give you a start among the banks of the mountain camps."

"I don't care for money. I want to settle down. I want a permanent home."

A smile came to the corners of the gold-bug's mouth.

"You had one once!" he said looking straight into Nick's eyes.

"The Prince of Bismarck flushed."

"Well, I think the man I have twice served owes me another!" he ejaculated.

"You do!"

"Yes."

"You mean that you want to become a citizen of Condor?"

"I want a chance to stand by you as of old, captain."

Bradd Brownell's hand moved toward the table where the drawer was.

"I will give you a chance," he went on. "I cannot forget that you have served me on several pretty important occasions. Let me see; the first one was—"

"The night the lady and her baby went away in a carriage."

"True! How good your memory is, Nicholas!" laughed Bradd.

"That was a good play!" exclaimed Nick.

The nabob's face instantly grew serious.

"Do you know what finally became of the pair?" he asked.

"No; only I know that the Englishman never found the trail. Ha! all his sleuth-hounds were thrown off the scent."

The next moment Bradd jerked the green cord above the table.

Roscoe came back.

"We have somewhat of a mysterious scheme here," he continued, turning to Nicholas. "I initiate every man taken into my service. Please stand against the wall yonder. Roscoe, show the gentleman the exact spot."

Roscoe stepped forward and took Nick's arm.

"By Jupiter! I've got a foothold. I'll take a thousand oaths to keep it, too!" flashed through Nick's mind.

The next moment he stood against the wall in front of the nabob, but several yards away. Roscoe stepped back.

"Now, Nicholas Norway, I make you my man forever!"

The next moment the wall at his back opened without noise, and the Prince of Bismarck disappeared with a yell!

CHAPTER XXVI.

JUST TOO LATE.

"THE moth came back to the flame and paid for his folly, eh, Roscoe?" ejaculated the Grandee of Shasta with a laugh, as the wall assumed its usual aspect.

Roscoe nodded his head and smiled.

"We will now go back to Leone. What is the latest?"

"There is nothing," answered Roscoe.

"It is a deep puzzle. I cannot believe that the girl has made her escape. There was not an avenue open to her."

Roscoe said nothing but waited quietly for orders, with his glance going occasionally to the wall which had opened and closed on Nicholas Norway.

Meanwhile a man was groping about a narrow chamber, as dark as an unlighted vault.

"In Jupiter's name, what kind of machinery have they got in this house?" he exclaimed. "I must have fallen a thousand feet; I thought I would never land, yet here I am, without a broken neck, but cooped up in a place not much bigger than Diamond Dart's shelf. I presume Bradd Brownell thinks he has extinguished Nicholas Norway, but I'll show him that it takes more than a blow like this to snuff me out. He must have pressed a button in the floor with his foot, or may be the man called Roscoe did it. But no difference—I charge it all up to him!"

As we well know, the speaker was the Prince of Bismarck.

He had been thrown into a pit of some kind, but fortunately had escaped with his life—a miraculous proceeding, he thought, and one on which he heartily congratulated himself.

A dozen times he had made the circuit of the cavern and had found no outlet. It looked to him like a living grave, and his attempt to become a part of the Grandee's family had resulted most disastrously.

"Very well!" grated Nick, leaning against one of the walls and folding his arms. "My wish is that Crimson Claude will drag you to justice, Robert Graham! I find out what it is

to be the tool of a man without a conscience. Retribution will come. Vengeance may tarry along the route, but the mills of the gods will grind you in the end."

Nick gave vent to utterances like these until he felt exhausted; then, as if driven by a sudden impulse, he drew his knife and attacked the wall.

He found that the blade made a good impression, and he kept at work cutting steps in the darkness and drawing himself up foot by foot toward the top.

We leave him here for the present.

While he worked, the figure of a man carrying a lantern was going down a corridor a long distance away.

It was Roscoe.

Strange to say, Leone had not been found.

The attempt of the girl to get back to the palace after her discovery of the secret mine, as we have seen, had resulted in failure.

She got bewildered among the labyrinthine passages, and came back to the chamber with the three jets of fire and the mining implements.

Poor Leone!

She knew not what had taken place in Condor City, nor how many hours she had spent in the vain attempt to reach daylight. She had entered the mine a short time previous to the hour set apart for Buzzard Belt's trial, and the belief that Bradd Brownell had triumphed tortured her almost beyond endurance.

The gold-bug and Roscoe had failed to find her after their return from the plaza, and now Roscoe was at work again.

The light of the lantern fell upon the cold, gray walls of the underground retreat as he advanced. To any one at a distance the flame would appear a star, and Roscoe believed that Leone would hasten toward him on sight.

But the Grandee's man kept on and on without results.

He had discovered evidences of Leone's visit to the mine. The powdered rock that formed the floors of the corridors had given him impressions of her shoes; but Roscoe had not been enabled to track her.

More than once the Condor City miner would put his ear to the wall and listen.

The secret mine conveyed sound in a wonderful manner; but Roscoe's attempts to catch the girl's voice resulted in nothing.

"Find her!" was Bradd's last command. "Don't come back without the Queen of Shastaland!"

Thus Roscoe and his lantern went on, out of one corridor and into another. Now and then his light would reveal the walls of a considerable chamber, and the next moment he would plunge into another damp passageway.

Night had come down upon Condor City once more, but Roscoe did not pause to think of this. He knew that the men of the camp had banded against Buzzard Belt, and as he hated the California Sleuth with all the rest, he did not care to what extremes they carried their vengeance.

If he had been in the heart of the gold camp, instead of among the ghostly corridors of the secret mine, he would have witnessed a scene worth reporting to his master.

The porched cabin held a motley crowd as the sun went down, and there were a score of additions to it when night fairly set in.

The gold-camp pards were led by a man of herculean proportions, and a close friend of Monte, whose corpse had been wrapped in several blankets and lay ready for burial near by.

There was mischief in the eyes of every man, and ere long a first-class mob held possession of the porched shanty.

All at once a commotion was caused by the arrival of a man, who advanced to the giant director of the mob and spoke to him in low tones.

"Gentlemen," suddenly exclaimed the big man, looking over the crowd, "Loredo Lou reports the rascal gone!"

A howl of rage instantly broke forth.

Buzzard Belt gone? It was most unwelcome intelligence.

"Somebody has warned him! Whar is the traitor?" continued the giant. "We've played our hand secretly, but coolly. We gave him ter understand that we acquiesced in Captain Bradd's decision about the trail, but it was for policy. Now the man who killed Monte has run away!"

There was a rush for the door. Half a hundred men surged into the starlight and a score of hands gripped the heavy mountain six-shooters. The mob looked like a lot of beaten tigers, or a gang of baffled thugs.

"To the shanty!" cried some one, and off the whole crowd rushed, ever one eager to be the first to confirm or dispute Loredo Lou's report.

The door of Crimson Claude's cabin stood ajar, and the foremost spirits of the mob stopped as if they feared to advance nearer.

They did not know who awaited them beyond the threshold. Perhaps a cool man stood there with fingers at the triggers ready for the assault.

The halt outside was both embarrassing and ludicrous.

"Come along! Loredo says he isn't hyer, an'

that's enough!" rung out the voice of the leader, and his giant figure pushed forward, while half the mob held its breath.

There proved no excuse for the delay, for the cabin was found to be untenanted.

Buzzard Belt had fled, and the matches of the foremost toughs discovered a paper tacked to one of the logs opposite the door. It bore a notice like this:

"TO CONDOR CITY:—

"Certain circumstances oblige me to say farewell. May luck and fortune attend you, and may Monte be the last man to die with his boots on!"

"BUZZARD BELT."

Loredo Lou read the notice to the crowd, and when the last word had been greeted with a volley of oaths, a dozen hands seized it and tore it to pieces, just as they would have served Buzzard Belt if he had remained for their fury.

"Fire the nest!" shouted somebody.

The suggestion would have been carried out if better judgment had not prevailed, for the shanties of Condor were as dry as tinder at the time, and the burning of the spotter's cabin would have endangered the palace on the hill.

The sudden flight of Crimson Claude seemed to disarm the mob of much of its fury. When it withdrew from the cabin and found itself once more beneath the stars, it knew not what to do; its occupation seemed gone.

Presently some one reminded them that Monte had not been buried, and the whole crowd suddenly grown silent marched down to the dead man's cabin, and took up the body.

A grave on the mountain-side had already been prepared for its reception, and in the light of half a dozen torches held by bronze hands the remains of Crimson Claude's robber were laid to rest.

The sight of the handsome tough lying at full length in the narrow grave seemed to exasperate his pards, and it was sworn there by fifty men in unison that Buzzard Belt should be shot on sight wherever found.

While this somewhat solemn ceremony was being performed on the mountain, two persons entered Condor City from the south.

Nobody seemed to see them and they went quietly to a certain cabin whose door one of the pair—a woman—opened as if she was thoroughly familiar with the premises.

"This is my place," she said turning to her companion, a handsome man in the light of a cabin lamp. "From this cabin we go forth to vengeance and victory! The man on the hill shall be powerless to cope with us despite the mountain toughs he keeps at his back."

"I trust it shall be so," was the answer. "I would like to know what has become of the man who is in my employ."

"The man who—"

The woman paused abruptly, for at that moment she caught her companion's glance; then she leaned forward and touched his arm with the gentleness common to her sex.

"Pardon me! I can't think of Buzzard Belt as true to you when I know that he sent Leone into the web of the Gold Grandee!" she suddenly resumed with a smile.

"Don't mention it, Sybil," the man said. "I am going to trust Crimson Claude a while longer."

A little while later the man was the only occupant of the hut.

"I am nearer him than I have been since the night he swooped down upon me like an eagle in Denver!" he exclaimed, his eyes getting a mad flash at the sound of his own voice. "I told Crimson Claude that I would not come closer than Yuba without his orders, but here I have followed a woman to Condor City—a woman who draws me after her by some strange spell, and a creature who hates Shasta's Gold Grandee as I must hate him. Silver Sybil saw my wife die in Santa Fe and yet she kept the information back till now. Lady Harcourt being dead, I have but to find the daughter. But where is she? After eighteen years of ceaseless search I have discovered—what?—that my wife is dead and the child still missing. Sybil will come back to report my detective's whereabouts and then—Ah! here she is!"

At that moment the door opened and Silver Sybil came forward.

Her dark eyes sparkled.

"I told you the man was faithless!" she exclaimed, reaching Captain Mystery in a single stride. "Buzzard Belt killed a man since I went away and awhile ago he fled from a Condor City mob—fled forever like a coward!"

The man's look became a stare as she proceeded, and in the silence that followed he dropped into a chair and buried his face in his hands!

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SOUTHERN TRAIL.

It was true that Crimson Claude had left Condor City; but Silver Sybil's charge of cowardice was not just.

The man had too much at stake to turn his back forever on Bradd Brownell and his bronze slaves, and the thought of deserting Leone had never entered his head.

"Never mind, my men tigers. I know you want my blood, but I will disappoint you. I

will lead you to believe that I have run away from you all, but the awakening will prove an event in Condor City's career."

With these words, spoken while his eyes held a fearless sparkle, the California Sleuth turned his back on the gold camp and left the mob to load the air with curses and epithets.

Mounted on a horse that nothing seemed to tire, Crimson Claude galloped south to Yuba City, and his first visit after entering the camp was paid to the cabin so long occupied by Captain Mystery.

Of course he found it empty and a call at Juan's faro-den acquainted him with the Englishman's encounter with Shadow Simon and his subsequent departure.

As Crimson Claude turned to quit the place the door opened in his face, and he was confronted by a man whom he did not at first recognize.

"Great God! it is Simon himself!" exclaimed the California spotter after a second look. "What has happened? The fellow bears the marks of cords on his face and neck. He has fared roughly at somebody's hands."

Shadow Simon saw only the tempting bottles displayed on Juan's shelves behind the bar, and with wild, bloodshot eyes he came forward unsteadily, his gaze rivetted on the bottles.

"Something!—hot as Tartarus!" he cried, clutching the counter while he glared at Juan. "I've been through a dozen deaths since I left hyer."

Crimson Claude stepped back and watched the man.

He knew Shadow Simon for Bradd Brownell's warden and tool; he knew what desperate games the man was willing to play for his master, and while he was startled by his appearance, he could not but secretly rejoice that somebody had gotten the better of the scoundrel.

Simon did not stop until he had cleared his parched throat with some of the hottest liquor in Shasta-land, then he turned half-way around and for the first time saw the sleuth.

The sudden confrontation seemed to stun the nabob's man. He looked at Buzzard Belt from head to foot as if he could not credit the evidence of sight.

"It is me, Simon," ejaculated the detective. "You don't look like your old self. What has happened?"

Shadow Simon appeared about to answer with a fierce oath, for he was in the worst of moods just then, but Crimson Claude saw him check himself by an effort.

"I've been through the mill," he answered with a grin that only intensified, as it were, the red marks which extended from the corners of his mouth across his cheeks. "I've been chewing a lasso ever since yesterday morning. By glory! if I had the witch here who bridled me with that bit of hair, I'd hand her over to the coroner o' Shasta county!"

"Who did it?"

"Thar's only one woman who could, an' thet is Silver Sybil o' Condor!" cried Simon.

"You must have submitted."

"What could a man do with a revolver takin' his photograph on a lot o' leaden spheres?"

"Aha! she had the drop!" grinned Juan from behind the counter.

"I should ejaculate!" exclaimed Simon, giving him a quick look. "Arter she got the drop, she lashed me ter a tree near Lone Pine Gulch, an' rode off, sayin' I war left for ther wolf an' ther vulture. An' I came almighty nigh furnishin' a lunch for both."

"Who came to your rescue?"

"Fortune an' my teeth!" was the answer. "Ther lasso war put into my mouth ter prevent me from callin' help. I went ter work at it with my jaws, but it war slow business. All day yesterday, an' till after midnight, I chewed for life. I cut thet devil's cord hair by hair. Ther big birds came just as Sybil said they would, and with darkness, I heard ther Shasta wolves she'd invited ter ther feast. A man can't chew fast with a bit like that in his mouth. I should say not."

"Jehu! when I got through ther cord I let out a yell that must hev wakened ther grizzlies on old Shasta itself. My work seemed ter undo ther whole cord an' after a good deal o' wriggling I stepped from ther tree Simon o' Condor City once more. Mebbe you don't think I want ter see that woman?" and Shadow Simon leaned forward and laughed fiercely in Crimson Claude's face. "Mebbe I wouldn't give my hopes o' paradise ter have her hyer now? She'd better ride that hoss o' hers ter ther gulf!"

He raised his hand and brought it down upon the counter with an emphasis that added a ferocious gleam to his eyes. Juan seemed to enjoy Simon's rage, and he would have given no inconsiderate sum if Silver Sybil had entered his ranch at that moment.

He would have enjoyed the "fun."

"How came you and Sybil to meet near Lone Pine?" asked the California Sleuth.

Simon started. A truthful reply necessitated the giving away of his commission from Bradd the Gold Grandee, and he (Simon) did not believe he was at liberty to divulge it to Buzzard Belt whom he knew the nabob hated.

"Mebbe ther meetin' war accidental," an-

swered Simon after a minute's reflection. "Anyhow, we met thar an' I got ther worst o' ther meetin'. Did ther witch come back?" he asked turning suddenly upon Juan.

"No."

"Ah! I recollect. She war goin' on!" ejaculated the nabob's trailer.

"South?" queried Crimson Claude. Simon looked at the man.

"South! ef you want ter know!" he said. "What's happened lately in camp?"

"A good deal as you'll find by going back," was the quick reply.

Simon was not to be outdone by the detective's tortures.

"An' a good deal would hev been done ef ther black-eyed viper hadn't got ther drop on me!" he grated.

"You followed the woman," said Crimson Claude.

Shadow Simon drew back and showed his teeth.

"You were sent after her!" the California Sleuth went on following him up. "You were acting under orders from the man on the hill."

"What ef I war?" suddenly blurted Simon. "I reckon this is a free kentry if it is without laws an' such things."

"You were tracking Silver Sybil and she got the best of you!" laughed Crimson Claude. "That is just what I did to your master a short time ago."

The face of Bradd Brownell's man grew dark and threatening.

"Did you meet him in the open?—in Condor?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, on the plaza, my dear Simon. All Condor was there, the dead as well as the living."

"An' you killed him?"

Shadow Simon bent his body forward, while his eyeballs seemed about to burst from their sockets. His hands were tightly clinched.

"No, I whispered a few words at his ear. I was on trial for my life."

"For what?"

"For killing Monte."

"You?"

"Yes."

"An' they didn't lengthen your neck for it?"

"No."

Simon seemed amazed. He looked at Crimson Claude like a man bewildered by some startling revelation.

"What did you tell ther captain? You say you whispered something that broke up ther court?" he suddenly exclaimed.

"I'm not obliged to retail it to you, Simon."

The bronzed messenger of death seemed to choke.

"Wal," he cried, "you're runnin' away from Condor. You get out o' ther noose by a fraud, but I notice thet you don't stay ter give ther pards o' Condor City a chance."

The California spotter's reply was a laugh that made Simon's teeth meet.

He knew that this man was armed while he had come back to Yuba without a single weapon. For all this his failure to cope with Silver Sybil, and his intense sufferings at the tree had carried him beyond the line of prudence.

"If you ever come back ter Condor—"

"I'm coming back!"

"Hear me through!" Simon struck the counter again. "I say if you ever come back thar'll be ther dandiest one-sided picnic Shasta county ever saw. Thar, sir! I've had my say an' I speak 'by ther card'—I do, by Jupiter!"

Shadow Simon turned to the counter and helped himself to the contents of the bottle which Juan had not removed during the encounter.

"You are going back to Condor?" asked Crimson Claude.

"Mebbe so."

"Tell Captain Bradd for me that he'll have to hold a better hand than he does now to be stakeholder at the close of the game."

"Who are you?"

"Buzzard Belt," answered the detective with a smile.

"You're more than that."

All at once the detective leaned forward and let his left hand drop lightly upon Simon's shoulder.

"My angelic Simon, I'm a man who knows the day and the hour when you took service under Bradd Brownell," he replied coolly. "I know why you went to Santa Fe at a certain time to ascertain the burial place of a woman who had died there. I know that, despite all your shrewdness, the burial spot was kept from you; but the fact of the woman's death you discovered. I know that Bradd Brownell suspected that that woman was an English lady who had a child whose whereabouts are unknown to the gold spider of the web on the hill. My dear Simon, you see I know something if I have made Condor City my world for a year."

"Great Caesar's ghost!" ejaculated Shadow Simon. "If you know all this you must be—"

"Yes, I am he!" was the interjection, and Simon found the detective's face almost against his.

The eyes of the two men were regarding each other in a manner that held Juan spell-

bound, and when Crimson Claude stepped back Simon seemed to catch a breath of relief.

"Good-by. You have made yourself known. We will look out for you in the future!" ejaculated Simon, and the next moment he walked toward the door followed by a fearless look from the ferret's eyes.

"He followed the wrong woman when he trailed Sybil!" exclaimed Crimson Claude. "I know a little about her career, and the episode near Lone Pine is in keeping with a part of her past. I'll wager an eagle that she dealt with Simon thus severely because she hates his master. She gave me a lecturing in Condor, ha, ha! But I'll make it all right with Sybil one of these days. She has gone south, after Captain Mystery of course. That is my trail as well."

The following minute Juan was alone behind his counter without a customer. The figure of the detective had disappeared after Simon.

"Ho! look out, Crimson Claude!" sung out a loud voice as the sleuth stepped into the street. "You followed me ter Santa Fe that time an' now ther drop is mine!"

The detective had already turned and as he looked at Simon and his leveled revolver a sharp click was heard.

There was no report.

"Better luck next time Simon!" laughed Claude.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SIMON FAILS AGAIN.

CRIMSON CLAUDE'S trip south took him to Owlet Ranch, where he learned that Silver Sybil had taken Captain Mystery from the clutches of Jack Sands and his gang, and had departed north with him.

"Then I go back," muttered the California detective, and forthwith he turned his horse's head toward Condor City.

He had missed the pair through circumstances which had operated against him, and while he galloped back he wondered if Sybil would take the Englishman to the Shasta gold camp.

"Sir Harold's appearance there might disarrange some of my plans!" he ejaculated to himself. "If Bradd Brownell should discover that his old enemy has come to Condor, a tragedy of the darkest kind is liable to follow. Sybil hates the nabob with all her heart; she has a grievance which she wants to avenge, but why must she drag the Englishman to the ground? What mastery has she obtained over him? I must find out. This woman may be more than I think her," and he fell into deep study as his horse carried him back to Yuba.

We have witnessed the arrival of Silver Sybil and her companion, Captain Mystery, in Condor. We have seen the man's despair when told that the California spotter had left the camp, fleeing, as it seemed, from the vengeance of the dark-shirted mob.

Nobody had seen the pair come back to Condor.

The toughs were too much interested in Crimson Claude to expect such visitors, and Sybil had taken the Englishman to her cabin without suspicion.

She did not expect Shadow Simon to come back like a bloodhound at her heels, for she had left him bound to a tree between Yuba and Owlet, and she believed she had secured him for the wolf and the vulture.

She did not dream, therefore, when she found herself in Condor once more that her victim was on the homeward trail, that he was coming back with the marks of her rope on his face and with vengeance to goad him on.

It was morning when Shadow Simon rode into Condor.

He had been told by his master, the gold-bug on the hill, not to return until he had disposed of the black-eyed viper; but here he was, home again and Silver Sybil was still at large. He had something worth reporting to Captain Bradd, and he believed that that something would counterbalance his failure in another direction.

A handsome but pale-faced man uttered an exclamation of surprise when Shadow Simon confronted him in a sumptuous room.

"So you're back!" cried the Gold Grandee.

"Looks that way," answered Simon, trying to grin, which effort seemed to lend an additional crimson to the marks of the ropes.

"Well, you found the viper?"

"Yes."

"She was going south, eh?"

"South."

"What was her mission?"

"She was following a man called Captain Mystery, a citizen of Yuba."

"Ho!" exclaimed Bradd. "Then the black-eyed viper had a pard, or maybe a man she wanted to sting. Which is it, Simon?"

"She doesn't want ter sting him, so far as I've found out," was the reply.

"What makes you speak of her in the present?"

"Because she is alive."

Shadow Simon drew back to await results.

He knew he had delivered a very unpleasant report, and he expected a thunder-burst to follow.

Bradd Brownell's brow darkened and his eyes seemed to take fire, but he did not break forth into denunciation.

"I can't believe it was your fault, Simon," spoke the nabob, calmly. "You always do your best—"

"But that woman is a caution!" exclaimed Shadow Simon, and then he put his hand up to his face. "She leaves her mark, you see, captain. She's quicker than a mountain cat an' twice as ferocious."

"Did she find Captain Mystery?"

"I don't know. He went toward Owlet after throwin' me half-through a wall at Juan's faro ranch. She may have found him; he was not far ahead of her."

The Shasta gold king was silent for a moment.

"What is the connection between the pair?" he asked.

Simon answered promptly:

"Hatred of you."

"How know you this, Simon?"

"They told me so, one at Juan's, the other when I was lashed to the pine."

"What is this Captain Mystery like?"

"Rather tall, good looking, with gray hair."

"His eyes?"

"A dark brown, and restless."

"He must have strength to handle you?"

"He's a lion!" exclaimed Simon. "Besides, he an' Sybil are friends. I got her to follow me to the ambush by servin' a lie on her in Yuba. I intended to fix everything there, captain; but she was too quick for yours truly. When I came back to Yuba arter my torture I found Buzzard Belt thar, also on hunt of this same Captain Mystery."

This time Bradd Brownell started visibly.

"I thought I'd electrify him soon," mentally ejaculated Simon, who saw the start and change of color. "He left hyer kind o' sudden, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"He shot Monte?"

"He did," replied Bradd.

"Afterward he told you something that put a sudden end to the prosecution."

"Did he tell you so?"

"He did."

Bradd ground his teeth till Simon heard them.

"But he didn't tell you what he said?" the nabob asked, lowering his voice as he leaned toward his servant.

"No."

"You saw him in Yuba, you say?"

"At Juan's."

"Still going south?"

"He did not disclose his plans."

Bradd left his chair and took several turns about the room, followed closely by his servant's eyes.

"Simon," he suddenly cried, coming back to the masked man and halting directly before him, "several rather startling things have happened here, since you departed. Our bonanza secret has been discovered."

Shadow Simon almost left his chair.

"By an outsider?" he cried, staring at the Grandee's countenance.

"Not exactly an outsider, but it amounts to the same thing," was the answer. "Leone has found out everything."

"That girl?" ejaculated Simon.

"In Fortune's name, how did it happen?"

"By some mischance the 'brown door' was left unlocked and we were all on the plaza," answered the nabob, half-savagely. "The bird was hunting a way out, and she got into the mine. Her foot-tracks were found in all the prominent rooms and in the corridors. We had a time finding her for she lost herself in the mine. Roscoe's last hunt was crowned with success; but he found the girl more dead than alive. Another hour would have finished her, I suspect. She knows everything, Simon."

Bradd Brownell paused to note the effect of his narrative on the man before him.

Shadow Simon had heard all with open mouth and with eyes dilated with wonder.

"It's a pretty go, isn't it, captain?" burst from his throat. "I never wanted a woman to get at the secret, but thank fortune she is still in the palace."

The Shasta king threw a swift look toward the door.

"The cage still holds the bird, Simon," he laughed.

"Did she discover the writing on the wall in the little room?" Simon asked.

"She refuses to tell me anything. I want you to try her. The girl must talk before I decide what to do with her. You will find her in the octagon room. She is fully recovered though I dare say she doesn't want another experience like her last in the secret bonanza. Go up to her, Simon. Make out that you don't like me any too well, and pump her dry. By Jove! that girl is beautiful. She's worth playing for. Go, Simon, and report to me as soon as possible."

Shadow Simon did not expect a mission of this kind so soon after his return. He had some pride of looks and was loth to enter Leone's presence with the marks of Silver Sybil's punishment fresh on his face.

But there was no alternative and choking down the legion of excuses that rose to his lips he left the room.

Several minutes later Simon entered a room almost directly above the one occupied by Bradd Brownell. He opened the door so noiselessly that it did not disturb the young girl who stood at one of the windows with her face turned from him.

Simon stopped in the middle of the eight-sided apartment and feasted his eyes on the faultless figure for several minutes.

Leone was totally oblivious of his presence, and the fellow's eyes snapped mischievously as he looked.

All at once he took a long stride forward and leaning over the girl's shoulder like a grinning satyr he spoke her name.

In an instant there was a sharp cry and Leone turned upon him, looked once and started back.

She had seen Simon many times among the cabins of Condor City, but his recent scars quite transformed him.

"When did your own name frighten you?" he asked with a light laugh.

Leone did not speak, as if she was trying to make him out.

"This is a real cage isn't it?" Simon went on. "I don't object to being hyer a part o' the time, but it's not the kind o' paradise I like. Besides, I'm tired o' the whole thing anyhow, an' by heavens! Bradd Brownell can put on the thumbscrews a little too often."

There came a light of hope—a transitory flash it was—into the girl's eyes.

"Why don't you go away, or do you want to remain here?" he went on.

"Perhaps I am a prisoner," she replied.

"In this place?" sneered Simon.

"Yes."

"Well, mebbe it wouldn't hold me an hour."

Leone, who had been watching him closely all the while, came forward with a quick stride that startled him.

"You are Shadow Simon. I see you now!" she exclaimed. "Where did you get your scars? You did not have them there when I saw you last."

Simon quite forgot himself. Leone's question seemed to bring up his torture at Lone Pine.

"I got my marks at the hands of a woman—a beautiful black-eyed witch like yourself, Leone," he flashed. "By Jove! you women are demons when your blood is hot."

Then he seemed to think that he was killing his mission, and he finished as suddenly as he had begun.

"I want a little revenge on the man I have served," he resumed, in different tones. "You want freedom, don't you, Leone? You've discovered a good deal since you came hyer; you've seen all that lies under the palace. Jehu! what a secret you hold! Did you see everything, girl? The writing on the wall—the little round chamber—"

"I saw enough!" cried Leone. "But I know better than to trust you, Shadow Simon. You are bound to Bradd Brownell with an oath!"

Simon recoiled, and looked at Leone, about whose mouth played a smile of triumph.

CHAPTER XXIX.

FILLING MONTE'S SHOES.

"Is this Yuba City?"

"Not by fifty miles."

"What paradise might this be, then?"

"Condor."

The first speaker drew back from the cabin door with a look of surprise.

He had disturbed two men in a cabin only a little distance from the foot of the hill crowned by the gold palace.

"I've got too far north then, haven't I?" he asked.

"Fifty miles too far."

"All this with a dead horse about a mile from camp, too!"

The man spoke in disconsolate tones and threw a furtive glance at the fire that blazed and cracked in a rude fire-place beyond the two men.

"Come far, stranger?" asked one of the pair, sympathetically.

"About a hundred."

"Tired, then?"

The answer was a smile.

"Take 'im in, can't we, Jim?" went across the table.

"I kin go on, gents. Night an' a dead hoss never stopped Tom Rustleback afore. Why need they stop 'im now, when Yuba ar' only fifty miles away?"

Perhaps the two men had sized the stranger up, and had come to the conclusion that his stay might be made profitable. He was rather well dressed, but very dark of skin, with a smooth face and a good eye.

He certainly was a stranger in the Shasta country, if he could mistake Condor for Yuba.

"Wal, I kin stay over," he said, in reply to a rather pressing invitation, and then he entered the cabin and took a stool.

"Condor, eh?" he went on, looking at the two

pards. "I've heard o' ther place more'n once. Noted for suthin', hain't it?"

"For a few toughs like ourselves," was the laughing reply.

"An' like me, Tom Rustleback, mebbe," the stranger joined in.

His voice carried a twang which, while it did not make it disagreeable, rendered it very peculiar and noticeable.

His hair was cropped, something unusual in Shasta-land at the time, and when he found the two men noticing the innovation, he removed his hat and leaned forward with a grin:

"My misfortune, gents," he remarked, putting a hand on his head. "In ther first place, a mountain fever, an' then suthin' else. You understand?"

The two pards nodded and kept looking at him.

"We've all had a little trouble in our time," he went on. "I war carryin' things ag'in' ther camp with a hand full o' aces, when ther razor followed ther fever. Pine Notch war ther camp. Guess I won't go back. Ha! ha!"

The pards of the cabin rather liked the man the night had brought to them.

What if he had been banished with cropped head from Pine Notch? He was not the first man who had been forced to leave a California camp. One of the two men who listened to his story had had a similar experience, and knew how to sympathize with the exile.

The brief reference to his banishment seemed to link him to his auditors, and ten minutes after he had made it, the three were having a game of cards in the light of a tin lamp.

Acquaintances are rapidly made in the Wild West. Rough men are thrown together under peculiar circumstances, and some of the fastest friendships of life are formed.

In Shasta-land it was no disgrace for a man to be an exile. It was but one of the episodes of a wild life, and Tom Rustleback was no worse off than thousands of others.

"Whar's ther camp thet's got a palace in it?" casually asked the exile as he shuffled the greasy cards.

The two men exchanged rapid glances.

"What of it?" asked one.

"Oh, I've heard o' it," was the answer. "Pears to me it ar' somewhar in this part o' Shasta."

"It is here."

"You don't say so?" was the exclamation.

"Ther owner of ther palace is your captain, eh?"

"He is Bradd Brownell."

"A nabob."

"Pretty well off, eh, ain't he, Jim?" smiled one of the men glancing at his companion.

"Middlin'," was the response in the same tone. The game went on.

Tom Rustleback's thought of the gold palace seemed to have been a passing one; he did not refer to it again until the last game was over nearly two hours after his coming to Condor.

Not much money had changed hands. The cabin pards did not have much to lose, and the man from Pine Notch seemed in the same financial condition. However, he had lost more than his opponents, as if fortune was against him, but he did not mourn his discomfiture.

"Do you have quiet times hyer?" he asked across the table.

"Ginerally speakin' Condor is dull, but we've had things lively within the last week."

"Any trigger work?"

"Some."

"Like we used to have at Pine Notch afore I left for my health. What war your disturbance like?"

"A man called Buzzard Belt killed Monte."

"In a tussle?"

"Yes, but thar war no self-defense about it."

"Ho! well, you gave the shooter what?"

"By Jupiter! he got away."

"Before the trial?"

"No! he mesmerized ther judge an' ran from the mob."

"He was a cute one, then!"

The two men made no reply.

Crimson Claude's escape from Condor City was of too recent date for them to recall it with any degree of calmness.

"He was a scoundrel!" cried one of the men.

"We would have hung him, sir, if he had stayed; we hope to hang him yet."

"If he comes back," suggested the Pine Notch man.

"He says he will come, but Condor knows better," was the reply.

"A man who runs from a noose doesn't poke his head into it just to feel it tighten."

"Not often," remarked Tom Rustleback, and then after a minute's silence he asked:

"Thar's no openin' for me hyer if I wanted ter stay?"

"Not for a stake on your own hook."

"I don't exactly mean that. I'm a miner born, an' I know more about ther bowels o' Shasta-land than many another man."

"Who's goin' inter Monte's shoes, Jim?" asked one of the pards of his companion.

"I don't know."

"Mebbe they'd fit our friend here."

"If he'd suit ther captain they would. Look

here, Mr. Rustleback; would you rather be loose-footed than bound?"

"That depends," was the answer. "I've got nothin' particular ahead. I'd prefer a steady place, an' ther sooner ther better."

One of the men went to the door and leaned out for a few seconds.

"Thar's a glimmer in ther third window," he said to his companion when he came back.

"We might try," was the response, and the speaker continued as he turned to Rustleback:

"Captain Bradd needs a man in Monte's place, an' we think o' tryin' you."

"Very well. I'm for him if I suit, for Tom Rustleback kin work in any kind o' harness, an' work well, too."

"Shoot us for gophers ef we don't try you now; but first, if the captain should accept you, you'll hev ter sign papers thet'll hold you like they hold us—forevermore and a day after."

Tom Rustleback laughed and got up with the two men.

"I object to nothin' if it's fair," he exclaimed. "I'd as soon stop in Condor as run the risk o' starvin' in Yuba."

The three men went out and directed their steps toward the hill.

The man from Pine Notch walked between his new friends with no change of countenance, and with no outward sign to indicate that the episode of the cabin had particularly delighted him.

Near the front door of the palace a halt was made, and Rustleback was left with one of the men, while the other went forward and disappeared.

If the exile's eyes could have followed him through the night, he would have seen him pass around the house and give three raps on a small door in the rear.

"Who is it, Simon?" asked a handsome man in one of the luxurious rooms as Shadow Simon came in with a message.

"Yreka James, captain. He says he's got a man who might fill Monte's place."

"I don't want him!" snapped Bradd Brownell.

"Tell him—Hold on, Simon. Is the man a stranger to Condor?"

"James says yes."

"Call Yreka in."

Shadow Simon disappeared and in a little while Yreka James, hat in hand, walked into the gold-bug's presence.

"So you think you have a man who will take Monte's place?" suddenly ejaculated Bradd, bending forward with a look of curiosity on his face. "Don't you know that nobody can fill Monte's shoes?"

"Of course they can't in a sartain way, captain," stammered Yreka James. "But I thought you wanted another man ter keep ther ranks filled. Thar's a man with Oll at the foot o' ther hill. He struck Condor awhile ago."

"From where?"

"Pine Notch."

"Where is that, Simon?" and Bradd threw a glance at his servant who had conducted Yreka James into the room.

"About a hundred miles away, over on Satan's River," was the prompt reply.

Bradd turned to Yreka James again.

"What is he like?"

"Rather tall, dark an' smooth, with close hair, an' a business-like air."

A smile played at the corners of the nabob's mouth.

"And you think he'd fill Monte's place?"

"I—I thought you might like another man."

"We've got enough, but I'd like to see this fellow from Pine Notch open his eyes. Bring him up, James."

It was evident that the command did not find favor with Shadow Simon.

He looked at Bradd Brownell as if to rebuke him, but said nothing.

Somewhat elated over the outcome of his mission, Yreka James hurried from the palace and rejoined the two men waiting for him on the hill.

"Come along," he ejaculated, addressing Tom Rustleback.

The man's hands closed suddenly and he seemed to brace himself for the interview, then, with a nod of acquiescence, he walked up the hill toward the house of mystery.

Yreka James and pard took him to the rear door where he was received by Shadow Simon who stood waiting for them, and two minutes later he was ushered into the presence of the gold sport of Shasta-land.

The moment Bradd saw his visitor he began to scrutinize him from head to foot, and when Simon departed, in deference to a slight gesture, the two men were alone.

"They tell me you come from Pine Notch?" said the Shasta nabob, looking up into the face before him, for the man had not been invited to a chair.

"From Pine Notch last," was the reply in the peculiar twang which had struck Yreka James and pard.

Bradd looked him over again.

Half an hour later Shadow Simon was summoned back into the room.

"This man has been taken into the service, Simon," remarked the nabob.

Simon looked astonished.

"It's all right if you say so, boss," he mentally ejaculated. "But if I war runnin' this ranch I'd choke ther man from Pine Notch as I would a rattler. I don't like him!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE CARD FROM PINE NOTCH.

THE next day the man who had been taken into the nabob's service was shown to the mines under the palace.

Bradd Brownell seemed to have taken a fancy to him, but not so Shadow Simon.

The confidential messenger and trailer viewed Tom Rustleback's coming into the house with a good deal of distrust, but he did not remonstrate with his master.

"Don't I know that that man came hyer on purpose ter get inter our employ?" Simon said frequently to himself. "He is playin' a cool game for somebody, if not for himself. He may be from Pine Notch an' he may not. I'll bet my head, an' it's ther best piece o' property I own, that ther Pine Notch story is a part o' his game."

Simon was much discomfited over his attempt to hoodwink Leone and to get her to divulge all she had seen during her wanderings in the mine.

As we know, the girl had recognized him despite the broad fresh scars made by Sybil's lasso, and had refused to divulge anything.

The Gold Grandee was much put out over Simon's report of his attempt, and the Shadow had been dismissed with a growl of dissatisfaction.

Thereafter Simon spent a good deal of his time outside the palace.

"Let the man from Pine Notch have his way," growled Shadow Simon. "I seem ter be losing ground in the palace. Captain Bradd doesn't like it, first, because I didn't fix Silver Sybil, and, next, because I failed to pump the girl. Mebbe he thinks he kin find a tool in Tom Rustleback. All right, captain; hunt for a tool thar an' get bitten."

The man from Pine Notch soon got acquainted with the interior of the mine.

He was taken to the chamber where fifty swarthy fellows were engaged in loosening quartz and taking it to the crushers which Leone had discovered.

The scene was a wild and animated one. A startling light revealed it, and lent it an aspect the day he could not give. Fifty men, all muscular fellows with sleeves rolled to the elbows and moving hither and thither underground was a sight seldom seen even in the Shasta region.

These were Bradd Brownell's slaves, these were the men he owned, the men he had united to him with an oath. They were ready to do his bidding from toil at the quartz mills to hot work in Condor City.

He paid them well and they always had enough to lose over the gaming tables of the camp.

Tom Rustleback had taken the oath which Bradd required of those who entered his service, and when he stood among the bronzed miners he could feel himself as much the nabob's slave as they were.

"In fortune's name, where did you get on to this bonanza?" suddenly exclaimed Tom, looking into the proud eyes of the lord of the mine.

A smile was the first reply.

"Not here," was the real answer. "Let us go back to the library," and the two men left the mines and went up to the elegant room to which the reader has been introduced.

"How did I find the bonanza, eh?" laughed Bradd, as he toyed with the wineglass he had just emptied. "It was somewhat of an accident. Would you like to hear it?"

"Certainly, if you care to talk," was the response.

"Nearly two years ago about the time I was quitting Denver I ran across a man who was supposed to be slightly deranged. He went by the name of Juarez Joe from the supposed notion that he had once served under Juarez, the Mexican general. Joe's hobby was a goldmine which he had discovered somewhere. He carried on his person a number of greasy old diagrams which nobody could decipher but himself and which nobody ever tried to make out. The man crossed my path and produced an impression, for just then I was anxious to embark in 'something big.'

"I listened to his story and looked at his maps which were Greek to me until he made a few explanations that let a little light in upon them. I began to think that the man might not be as crazy as report made him out. He seemed pleased with my attention, and when I found that I was going to quit Denver at a certain date, I made an agreement with Juarez Joe. One month later I met him according to appointment not many miles from where we now sit. He had drawn new maps from his old ones, and they were plainer to me. After awhile, with Joe's help, I located the bonanza, which turned out to be something gigantic. It had been partially worked before, but from some cause had been abandoned.

"Juarez Joe would never tell me how he found it, and I was content to let him keep the

secret, as it seemed to please him to do so. The discovery of the mine was followed by the erection of this house over it. I went away for a spell and picked out my men one by one. The building of Condor City about the palace followed as a matter of course. As I was used to luxury, I surrounded myself with the best that money could buy. You see it here," and the Shasta nabob's hand described a circle as his eyes glanced at the elegance of the room.

"What became of Juarez Joe?" asked Tom Rustleback.

"The fellow fell sick shortly after our arrival here," was the answer. "I did all I could for him with my limited knowledge of medicine, but his disease baffled me. This was the first body to rest in the little cemetery which now contains a dozen good men. Fortunately for me, Joe did not die until after the bonanza had been located and partially explored. If the fellow had lived he would not be homeless now, and there would be two Shasta gold kings instead of one."

Bradd Brownell laughed at the end of his narrative, and filled the two glasses on the table.

"A fellow likes to keep up good living when he can," he suddenly went on. "I've had my ups and downs, but no 'downs' since coming into the Shasta country."

"Of course you are American born," ejaculated the man from Pine Notch.

"I? No! I am from near London."

"Oho!" exclaimed Rustleback, reaching his hand forward. "Let me congratulate you."

The Gold Grandee gave him a stare.

"What mean you?" he asked.

"England is my birthplace, though I have nearly lost my nationality among the mountains."

Bradd Brownell did not refuse the proffered hand.

"From near London, eh?" Tom Rustleback went on. "Many's the time I've threaded her streets; once or twice a little faster than I wanted to."

"Are you from London proper?" asked the nabob, as he leaned back in his chair and looked searchingly at his new man.

"I'm from Carrington."

Bradd Brownell was seen to give a slight start as if the name had affected him.

"From Carrington I've said, but I made London my nest for some years," Rustleback went on. "I might be there yet if a little event had not transpired. I don't like the Carrington people any too well, for I was involved in a difficulty with a Harcourt there who virtually forced me from the realm and sent me to America, where I sought the mountains and a wild life!"

"A Harcourt?" echoed the gold nabob almost before Rustleback could finish. "Which one? I have known several of them."

"Sir Harold, the fellow who lost his family about twenty years ago," was the reply. "It was a little piece of poaching business and a silly thing to call up here in California, with a sea between us; but Sir Harold's part in the transaction was so bad that I can't forget! A good thing it was that he lost his family. You may have heard o' it, being as near London as you say."

There was a most singular light in Bradd Brownell's eyes, and his color was coming and going in patches which showed that he was agitated.

"When did you quit England?" he suddenly asked.

"Sixteen years ago."

"Then you don't know whether this Englishman ever found his family."

"He hadn't up to the time I left. He was throwing his money away on Scotland Yard detectives and such things. I presume he finally broke himself up at it."

"He did!" exclaimed Bradd, positively. "I happen to know that he had to sell his estates, and I believe he suddenly left England. Did you ever hear it rumored that he might have made away with his wife and child?"

"Yes, but I never went that far against Sir Harold," was the response. "I accepted his side of the story."

"Which was—what?"

"That an old enemy named Graham abducted the pair."

"That was his story. I recollect it now," smiled the Shasta king. "But they tangled him up in a big trial when they found some bones under an old lodge in his deer park. He got out of the web somehow but after that he seemed to have the people against him. His wife was pretty. I used to know her, and by the way, I have a little reminder of the lady."

Bradd Brownell left his chair and walked to an elegant desk that stood near the lofty bookcase.

The look of Tom Rustleback followed him and watched his every movement.

The Shasta nabob unlocked the desk and took out a small packet, with which he came back to the table.

Next moment he was removing some paper from something at the center of the pocket, and when the operation had been performed, the man from Pine Notch saw a miniature.

"That is Lady Cecille Harcourt," said Bradd,

handing the picture to his new man. "She's worth hunting for, don't you think? Sir Harold won a prize when he carried her off from a dozen young lords."

Tom Rustleback was gazing at the face in his hand.

It was the face of a proud but beautiful young woman, English in looks and dress, and worthy the love of the best of men.

"I saw her once," he said, glancing up at the California nabob, who was regarding him in silence, "and that was when she came out on the lawn and told her husband that he had game enough without withholding it from the people."

"Took your part, did she?" exclaimed Bradd.

"Yes."

"Well, she could do that thing if she thought it would irritate her husband. I wonder what ever became of her."

At that moment Tom Rustleback looked up from the picture again, and the eyes of the two men happened to meet.

Before either could speak, a bell tinkled violently over the Grandee's head.

"They want me in the mine a moment," he exclaimed. "Keep Lady Cecille company," and off he went, disappearing in a second.

For a moment Tom Rustleback continued to occupy his chair amid the silence of the room, then he turned and threw a glance toward the desk, a few feet away.

He then got up and stepped forward, his dark eyes aglow.

"There is now a web within a web, Bradd Brownell," he exclaimed. "We will see who is the better spider! I see you haven't forgotten the old English episode, nor the fact that Juarez Joe helped you to this bonanza. If no one interferes—and who can?—I will show you that Crimson Claude, the California Sleuth never loses nor leaves a trail! The best card is the one from Pine Notch!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE SHADOW OF BETRAYAL.

IF no one interfered!

The man in Bradd Brownell's house, the sport from Pine Notch, felt confident of ultimate success if he was not interrupted in his plans.

He had succeeded by a shrewd play in getting beyond the closed portals of the palace of Shasta land.

Buzzard Belt had come back to Condor City; not only this, but he was an inmate of the house of mystery, and a sworn member of the nabob's band!

It took nerve to play a part of this nature, to walk into the jaws of death, knowing that suspicion would be enough to hurry him to a doom that would be terrible.

The Gold Grandee did not remain long from the room. When he came back he found Tom Rustleback quietly filling the chair as when he had left him.

The likeness of Lady Harcourt lay on the table, and when Bradd picked it up he threw a smile toward the new recruit.

"Isn't it like her?" he asked.

"Wonderfully so," was the answer. "By the way, did you happen to know the Robert Graham who was charged with having abducted Lady Cecille and the child?"

"Slightly," replied Bradd.

"They never found him after the Harcourt disappearance."

"So it is said."

There was silence for the space of a moment.

"I wonder if he came to America?" Rustleback said.

"There is no telling. If he did abduct Lady Cecille and the daughter, I fancy he got even with Sir Harold for some affront. In this country he would have called him out and shot him down; but he evidently knew how to wound him deepest. This is a big country, Rustleback; a man can hide in it beyond the eyes of the keenest sleuth. Why, sir, in Shasta-land are a thousand and one retreats. All a man—Robert Graham, for instance—has to do is to change his name and settle down. He throws off the old man and puts on the new. But you know the Wild West pretty well if you came from Pine Notch."

A traceable smile appeared at the corners of Tom Rustleback's mouth.

"I have a place for you, but you need not go to work for a day or so," continued Bradd. "The business is not pressing. I am going to make you inspector of our receipts. All the dust the mine produces will pass through your hands. Monte used to fill the place, but the pistol of Buzzard Belt, whom may Satan take," Bradd seemed to hiss the words, "deprived me of his services. You are free to amuse yourself as you see fit. All the citizens of Condor are my men, save one."

"That one?"

"A man called Diamond Dart, but he is of no consequence," replied the nabob with a gesture. "He thinks to catch me for a big sum for the site of his shanty by holding back. Why, the mine will soon be under him; the boys are creeping that way now. I wouldn't give him a dollar for his claim. Mine is deepest and best!"

During the day Tom Rustleback remained in

the palace inspecting its beauties and mingling some with the men in the mines.

He was not viewed with suspicion by any one. The miners heard that he had been chosen by the master to take Monte's place, and as they were Bradd's slaves, they had no right to question his proceedings.

"I am in most danger from Shadow Simon's eyes," ejaculated the man from Pine Notch as he leaned against the wall of one of the subterranean chambers and watched the muscular toughs work the quartz mills. "He half believed he knew me when he let me in, but I looked him out of countenance, and then he wasn't so sure about it. He is the danger I have to contend with. The servant is shrewder than his master."

All day Shadow Simon remained away.

Had he gone off on the trail of Silver Sybil, the woman who had marked him for life? Had Bradd Brownell sent him after the black-eyed viper?

If Simon was looking for Sybil he need not look far, for we have seen the woman enter camp with Captain Mystery or Sir Harold Harcourt.

At that very moment the pair still occupied the little cabin within a stone's throw of the palace on the hill.

Simon had not gone far.

During the day which was rapidly giving place to night he rambled about the camp, chatting here with some of its inhabitants and playing there with others.

The shadow of the palace was sensitive on one point, and that was the manner by which he had received the red welts that disfigured his face.

Of course everybody asked about them, and Simon replied invariably with a piece of fiction not very well calculated to allay curiosity.

It was beneath the fellow's dignity to tell the toughs of Condor that he had been worsted in a meeting with a woman, and that woman Silver Sybil.

All at once Shadow Simon had a revelation which nearly raised him from the ground.

By the merest accident he saw a certain face at the window of Silver Sybil's cabin.

It was the face of a man, a handsome face with a gray beard and two rather sad but expressive black eyes.

Shadow Simon had a good memory; he knew the features at a glance.

"If he is in her house she can't be far off!" ejaculated the nabob's shadow. "By Jupiter! if the black-eyed viper is back in Condor here's a chance for me. I told Crimson Claude at Juan's bar that I'd pay Silver Sybil back for the welts that I carry on my face, and I'd go to the ends of the world to do it! But if she has come back here to give me a chance right at home so much the better!"

From the moment of his discovery Simon put an espionage upon the cabin.

He saw the dark shades of night gather about it, and when they had fairly taken possession of the camp he crept forward and looked in at the window.

Alas! for Simon, somebody had hung a curtain on the inside, and he began to curse his ill-luck. At last, however, he caught a glimpse of light, and the next moment his eye was at the tiny crack and he was surveying the interior of the shanty.

He saw two persons, a man and a woman, and he recognized both.

"Swing me for a steer-stealer if some new mischief isn't afoot!" he mentally exclaimed. "Don't I know, having put this and that together during the past few weeks, that Captain Mystery is Gold Dresden, the once nabob of Denver, and the Englishman who hates Captain Bradd with all his heart? The woman found him, probably at Owlet Ranch, and she has fetched him here for a purpose. Wouldn't I like to leap inside and show her the Shadow Simon grip? My time will come, however."

He had hardly finished when he heard Sybil's voice as she spoke to the man.

"The spider on the hill got an addition to his gold slaves last night!" she exclaimed.

"I thought he owned all the men here."

"But this man came from abroad," was the quick response. "He was taken on sight, strange to say, and is now in Monte's place. Monte is the man your detective killed, you know."

Captain Mystery bowed.

"If Bradd Brownell has taken a new man, that strengthens him," he resumed at last, raising his eyes to the woman who was watching him closely, but with no more care than Simon was regarding both. "A man from abroad, you say?"

"From Pine Notch."

"Who told you this?"

"Never mind!" laughed Sybil. "We are not friendless here if this is his domain! I saw the man from Pine Notch last night."

"You?" asked the Englishman with a start.

"Yes. He was at Yreka James's shanty before he got admitted to the palace. I was not idle, captain, and I had a good look at him while he played cards with James and his pard."

"What does this have to do with our fortunes?"

"A good deal. I am puzzled. The man who became one of Captain Bradd's slaves last night was in disguise."

"A spy?"

"Perhaps, but why should he want to play a game like that when he has helped the nabob to the prize he won when Lasso Pete died?"

Captain Mystery looked amazed.

"What! do you mean Leone?" he exclaimed.

"Yes."

"Then the man from Pine Notch is—"

"He is Buzzard Belt!"

These four words which fell distinctly upon Shadow Simon's ears almost drew forth a cry of betrayal.

Tom Rustleback Buzzard Belt and the Californian Sleuth?

It was startling.

"I didn't like him when I was told to admit him!" he cried. "By Jupiter! not a moment is to be lost if that man had entered the palace. The whole ranch is in danger. It is the biggest, coolest game I ever heard of. Great Caesar! Crimson Claude has the nerve of a lion and the cunning of a fox! And Captain Bradd never suspects. He has taken him in in Monte's place. Monte was loyal: this man is playing a game full of treachery."

Shadow Simon started back.

At the same moment he saw Silver Sybil lay her hand on Captain Mystery's arm.

"I am going out," she said. "I want to get the lay of the land before we make the assault. I intend to see who is on guard. Maybe fortune rescued Shadow Simon from the vulture, and the wolf, and sent him back to his old place."

"Fortune did nothing less, my star-eyed witch!" cried Simon through his teeth. "When you come about the palace you'll find the devil on guard! You can't come too soon, either. I'll be on hand!"

Seeing that Sybil was about to quit the cabin the nabob's man silently withdrew and betook himself up the hill.

More than once he threw a look back as if to see whether the witch of the gold camp was at his heels. He was afraid she would change her mind and not come.

Simon was the possessor of a very important secret.

He knew the identity of the man from Pine Notch, and he could throw a bombshell into the palace which would blast his hopes and win the game forever for the gold king!

For a play like this what reward could he not claim and receive?

He could afterward make the round of the California camps and fight "the tiger" wherever found. He could go to Frisco and indulge his gaming passion there.

The prospect bewildered Simon.

He reached the house on the hill and took a position in the shadow of a pine near the rear door.

At his elbow was a window, beyond which gleamed a ray of light which could not escape Sybil's eyes.

He waited twenty minutes. Then he heard a footstep and caught the dark outlines of a human figure.

Simon held his breath.

It was the black-eyed witch of Condor City.

Nearer and nearer came the woman, and fiercer gleamed the eyes of the man on guard.

The spy approached the window at Simon's left, and when she leaned forward with her hand on the sill, she was within arm's reach.

"She might see too much!" suddenly ejaculated Shadow Simon, and then, with the spring of a tiger, he went forward.

"Caught at last, my lasso-user!" he hissed, as Silver Sybil turned with an exclamation. "Don't you know me? Fortune sent me back to Condor to drag you into the clutches of the golden lion."

The woman had more strength than Simon bargained for; she was his match.

"You don't get away!" he went on. "I'll turn you over to the nabob, and then the man in your cabin."

At that moment something gleamed in Silver Sybil's hand, and then she struck twice at Simon's unguarded breast.

It was the work of the tenth part of a second.

With a cry Simon threw her away, and sprung toward the door.

"Give me a minute o' life, and I'll undo all their plans!" he exclaimed, and the woman saw him disappear!

The next instant a man with a wild, white face staggered into the nabob's library, which at that moment held two men.

It was Shadow Simon.

"Beware! beware!" he cried. "Crimson Claude!—Sybil!"

He reeled away, gave a wild cry, and struck the wall heavily.

He was dead!

CHAPTER XXXII.

IN MERCILESS HANDS.

THE Shasta nabob and his companion stood aghast at this startling tragedy.

Shadow Simon had sunk to the floor and the lamplight fell upon his upturned death-struck features.

A thrill swept the nerves of the man from Pine Notch.

What a narrow escape! Death had struck Shadow Simon just in the nick of time.

All at once Bradd Brownell went forward and bent over the man on the floor.

One look was enough.

"In God's name who did this?" he exclaimed turning upon Tom Rustleback.

The disguised detective shook his head as he moved toward the nabob.

"He got his death-burt outside, I think," he said with a glance at Simon.

"Yes, he came in out of the night. I heard the outer door open and then his feet in the hall. What did he say before he fell? It was something about Sybil, wasn't it?"

"And about a person whom he called—ah! let me see—"

"Crimson Claude!" cried Bradd. "Do you know that man? Have you ever heard of Crimson Claude, the California Sleuth?"

"Never, but we have no use for that kind o' men at Pine Notch," was the reply. "Let us see where Simon got his wound. It may give us a clew."

The search for the fatal wound did not last long.

It was found directly over the heart, two furious gashes almost merged into one, and the wonder was that Shadow Simon had reached the library alive.

"One of two persons killed this man," exclaimed Bradd. "He spoke two names just before he fell. You have not been here long, and I may tell you that Crimson Claude is said to be the other name of Buzzard Belt, the man who sent Monte to his last account. Silver Sybil is a woman who was permitted to take up her residence here some months ago. She is a black-eyed viper, and just the person to inflict a sting like the one that finished Simon. Those scars on his face came from her. If she has come back to Condor this is her work, and I promise you that swift justice will follow."

The nabob spoke with a coolness that betrayed no excitement.

If the dead man's lips could move the Pine Notch sport knew whom they would condemn. He had caught the glare of Simon's eyes just before he fell; he saw betrayal there as plainly as if the tongue had given him away.

He would have told Bradd Brownell that the man in his company was Crimson Claude, his old tracker, and Sir Harold Harcourt's sworn ferret.

There was no doubt of this, and the detective secretly congratulated himself on his narrow escape.

When the mine king jerked the green cord over the table Roscoe made his appearance. The man stopped short when he saw the ghastly face at the foot of the wall.

"That is Shadow Simon!" he exclaimed.

"It is nobody else," answered Bradd with a smile.

Roscoe threw a quick look at the new recruit.

"Our man from Pine Notch is not responsible for this," continued the nabob, who had caught Roscoe's glance. "Simon came in from the night to drop there dead."

"Is there no clew?"

"One may be found. We don't want to rouse the camp. You will take six of the best men and search it secretly for two persons."

"Two?"

"For Buzzard Belt and Silver Sybil."

Roscoe showed his astonishment in his look.

"Are tae back, captain?" he asked.

"We will know when you have searched Condor," was the response. "Six cool, careful men, Roscoe. If the woman is found bring her hither."

"Into the palace?"

"Yes. She will never carry any secrets back to the world. If Buzzard Belt is here, but I think he is not, you need not arrest him."

There was a certain quiet emphasis on the last words that attracted the man standing near the speaker.

Roscoe seemed to understand, and without further orders he quietly withdrew.

After awhile four men came into the room with the grime of the mine on their garments and took the body out.

"Simon was one of the faithful ones, but of late he failed to carry out my orders to the letter," remarked Bradd to his companion as the door closed behind the dead sport. "Not long ago I sent him after this woman Sybil with specific orders, and he came back without fulfilling them, and with the welts on his face. Do you know what happened? She got the drop on him and left him tied to a pine for vulture and wolf! If they met again to-night I fancy that Simon was the aggressor, for he had sworn vengeance. We will know something when Roscoe reports."

Meantime the woman who had given Simon his death wound had gone down the hill and toward the cabin where she had left the man called Captain Mystery.

"Back already?" exclaimed her companion, and then he looked steadfastly into her face and saw the strange glitter of her eyes.

"I ran against a guard whom I did not ex-

pect to meet," she ejaculated. "You have heard me tell how I served Shadow Simon, the nabob's spy?"

"Yes."

"Well, I found him."

"On guard at the palace?"

"At his old post, but on the outside."

"What happened?"

"I was in his clutches before I knew he was about."

"But he did not hold you, ha, ha!"

"He did not," and Sybil leaned forward, and ended with a derisive laugh: "I cut myself loose!"

"With a knife?"

"With this!"

The next moment the Englishman was gazing at a dagger that lay in the woman's hand.

The blade was bright and clean; there was nothing about it to show that it had entered a human breast.

"Two strokes and I was free!" Sybil went on rapidly. "The fellow tore himself away and bounded into the palace. I was at the door—at his heels; he said something wild and incoherently in the heart of the house, and then I heard him fall—dead!"

Sir Harold seemed to recoil from the beautiful narrator.

"It was a narrow escape!" she continued. "If the man had spoken what he knew we might be in danger."

"But are we not in peril as it is?"

"No. Bradd Brownell will not look for me."

"But his minions will search the camp, every cabin!"

"Will they imagine that the person who struck Shadow Simon lurks in Condor? Bradd Brownell will not think of such a thing. Tomorrow they will scour the mountains; the gold slaves will quit the mine for the trail. We will be secure here. As the nabob does not know that I have returned, this cabin will not be searched!"

Captain Mystery was silent.

It was evident that Sybil's logic did not reassure him. The death of Simon was an unlucky event, yet he was glad that the man had not betrayed his slayer.

"I am so near this man who is said to possess the secret that has cost me a fortune that my blood seems to burn when I think of him!" he mentally exclaimed. "My detective is on the inside of the gold palace. He is at work at the Gold Grandee's side, and for me! It would be best if I had not followed this woman back to Condor. I see it now. She is willing to kill as she goes, yet she has declared that she will force Bradd Brownell's secret from his bosom. Why can't I trust Crimson Claude? I will! tomorrow night I will go away. I will break with this woman. She hunts the Grandee for a purpose of her own. She will care little for my interests if they stand in her way."

"You don't like it," suddenly exclaimed Sybil, breaking in upon his thoughts.

"I wish you had not met Shadow Simon," he answered, with a frankness that seemed to displease her.

"Do you want a spy at our heels, a spy who knows nothing but the welfare of the monster on the hill?" was the quick response.

"Not that, but—"

"But you don't like harsh measures, not even in self-defense! I have to strike or be dragged into the presence of Bradd Brownell, and then farewell vengeance. I brought you back from Owllet Ranch, where I took you from the clutches of Jack Sands and his pards to help you fight the last battle on the only ground where it can be fought. If you want to go, I step aside. If you will trust the man who has left your cause to become a sworn member of the nabob's gang, Silver Sybil will let you have your way. You know where the horses are, or I will show you. The trail to Yuba and beyond is easily followed, even in the night. Come, Sir Harold. I will fight the Gold Grandee alone."

Sybil's lip curled proudly as she went to the door and laid her hand on the latch.

"Your wife is dead, but the child may be alive," she went on, seeing him hesitate. "I know the yearning of a parent's heart. I know that love and vengeance fill your breast at this moment. But why should that keep you here? You want to trust the man who has entered the Grandee's service under a new name. Tom Rustleback is your man! Ah! let us go to the horses."

The woman opened the door as the last word left her lips.

"Thanks! that saved our knuckles!" exclaimed a coarse voice.

Sybil turned and saw the speaker; at the same time Sir Harold started back.

Roscoe and three stalwart men like himself were at the threshold.

Their eyes glittered with the triumph of discovery, and with their gaze riveted upon Silver Sybil, they came into the cabin.

"What is it, gentlemen?" asked Sybil.

"We want you," replied Roscoe, his hand falling lightly on the woman's arm. "You will go with us without any questions, and with no preliminaries."

"But my friend here?" and Silver Sybil designated the Englishman with a glance.

"I guess we'd better take him too," was the answer. "Boys, take charge o' the gent yonder. The Queen o' Condor will go with me."

All this in a space of time startlingly brief. The surprise was complete.

"Are you acting on orders?" suddenly asked Sybil, looking into Roscoe's face.

"On orders from headquarters."

Sybil's face lost a trifle of color for a moment.

"Very well," she answered, through her white teeth, after the manner of a desperate person. "You cannot take me too soon into your master's presence. But why does he want to see me? And in the palace, too?"

"You ought to know. Shadow Simon lived one second too long for your welfare."

There was no reply to these words.

The following minute six persons left the cabin and went up the hill.

Roscoe's hand held Sybil like a vise, and not until they had crossed the threshold of the gold palace did the bronze fingers relax.

At last the Queen of Condor was in the house of mystery, a house from which she was never to emerge if fate could hold her.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FROM TRAP TO CLOSET.

THERE is one character in our romance who must not be entirely lost to view, and it is to him we now return.

We saw him last cutting niches in the wall of what appeared to be a shaft beneath the gold palace.

Nick Norway had failed to convince the Shasta nabob that he was too dangerous a man not to be humored as he desired.

His sudden fall into the secret shaft was witnessed in a previous chapter, and his knife promised to take him to the top if the blade held out.

Foot by foot the man mounted the wall.

Covered with dirt as he was, he might have passed through the sumptuous rooms of the Shasta palace without being recognized.

At last Nick reached the top, where he found himself in a small room with wooden walls, and totally dark.

"Maybe I had better take Diamond Dart's advice and keep out o' this muddle," ejaculated the Prince of Bismarck. "I admit that prospects don't look very dazzling, especially in this dungeon, but that may be better days for me. How much time have I spent here? I've no way o' telling that, but I've lost a good deal, and Diamond must be wondering what has become o' me. This is what a fellow gets for driving a cab in England, an' cutting telegraph wires in America."

Nick listened at the walls of his stygian chamber, but could hear nothing.

"I'm behind the secret door that opened when Captain Bradd gave the cue!" he went on. "I remember that he faced me when I went headlong down the shaft."

He fumbled up and down one of the walls until he found a cord which appeared to be wrapped with wire.

Nick's heart gave a joyful throb when he touched it.

Pulling the wired cord slowly, he caught a ray of light directly ahead, and the next moment was looking into the room from which he had been hurried from the nabob's presence.

A dull light pervaded the place, but it was strong enough to show the Prince of Bismarck that the room was untenanted at that time.

"I don't propose to keep this place an' run the risk o' having it suddenly explored," ejaculated Nick. "This house has better quarters for me, and as I helped to 'make' the man who runs it, I'll proceed to claim my share."

Norway's next move was to step out into the room which was the library, and in a little while he had got rid of much of the grime of the shaft.

What if Bradd Brownell should come back unexpectedly? What if one of his lieutenants should walk into the room?

The mental questions thrilled Nick.

He turned the light on a little more, and saw the richness of the rooms.

"He got his start when my hatchet cut the wires at Buzz Saw," he said through his teeth.

"They would have stopped him if I had not done that. Then he would have donned stripes in the Colorado prison, and Shasta would have had no Gold Grandee! He laughed at my letter of warning which told him that Buzzard Belt was Crimson Claude, the Englishman's patient ferret. And when I offer to help him he springs a trap on me—on Nick Norway, the man who was hunted out of England on his account by Sir Harold Harcourt's detectives. I want a hiding-place in some part of this gold-land web. I'm not going to leave till I bring him to time."

Nick crossed the floor and opened a door softly.

He knew not where he was going; he had never explored the Shasta palace.

The door showed him a room much smaller than the one he had just left, and beyond it he

found a hall in which a pair of stairs led to another floor.

The steps were tempting to the Prince of Bismarck, for they seemed to suggest seclusion in the upper part of the house.

Nick did not hesitate long, but mounted the stairs without noise.

On the second floor he had but little light to guide him.

All at once the Bismarck sport stopped and hugged the wall.

A door had opened not twenty feet away, and he saw a figure in front of it.

"By Jove! the angel of the palace!" broke involuntarily across his lips. "This is the girl Lasso Pete left when he died. Diamond Dart has told me the story, and Sybil touched up the picture here and there the night I walked from her cabin with Crimson Claude. She came here willingly; Buzzard Belt helped her into the palace, but it was for a purpose. He is against Captain Bradd. He sent the girl here for his spy. There can be nothing else in his move. Therefore, I have but to play a slick card to make her my friend."

The person watched by Nick while he thought thus was a young girl who had just emerged from a room, and who was standing in front of the door as if listening or waiting for some one.

Her graceful figure was visible to the Bismarck sport, but not her fair face nor the brightness of her eyes.

Suddenly she left her station and tip-toed toward Nick. He watched her every movement. Seconds seemed hours.

All at once his hand shot toward her and seized her arm.

"I am a friend—*friend!*" he whispered, as he drew her toward the wall where he stood, before she could sound the startled cry that rushed to her lips. "Like yourself, I hate the ground trod by the gold nabob. I have just escaped from one of his traps. I want a retreat from which I can issue some time and crush him!"

All this time the girl—Leone—was looking at him breathlessly, and with eyes dilated with wonder.

"Who are you?" at last cried out her trembling lips.

"Your friend and his enemy!" was the reply.

"But your name! You are not one of his slaves?"

"Not now," grinned Nick.

"But that doesn't satisfy me!" cried Leone, drawing back the length of his arm, but he pulled her forward again.

"Don't you know that we must not be found here?" he went on, paying no attention to her last sentence.

Leone's start and quick glance down the dim and ghostly corridor was answer enough.

"You know this palace; you've been here long enough," he continued. "Show me a room that is never visited. There must be a dozen of that kind under the Grandee's roof."

His appeal and his manner seemed to tell Leone that he was a man to be befriended.

"Come with me," she exclaimed.

"A bonanza, by Jove!" ejaculated Nick. "Satan helps his own when they try to help themselves. I guess Nicholas Norway has a chance for his white alley despite the trap and the shaft."

Leone led him back to the room from which he had seen her emerge.

It was well lighted and he could see her fair face, and the deep eyes still filled with wonder.

"Is this your nest, my bird?" asked Nick, throwing a rapid glance around the apartment. Leone smiled.

"It is not to be your hiding-place," she replied, and then she led him into an adjoining room, and through it into a closet-like place, whose dust told him that it was seldom visited.

"What do you think of this?" asked Leone, as she turned upon him in the light of the hand-lamp she carried.

"It is good enough for a king in my fix," was the reply. "Nobody ever comes here, I presume? The dust must be an inch thick! They have to pass through your room to get here, eh?"

"Yes."

"Has this closet but one outlet?"

The girl crossed the floor and turned a little knob which she found on the wall.

"I don't know where this leads to," she went on as she opened a door and revealed a dark shaft-like place. "This house is full of such puzzles."

Nick leaned forward and saw a rope dangling in the opening.

"Maybe, by Jupiter! it's a continuation of the shaft to which I was introduced!" he exclaimed, drawing back.

The next moment he caught Leone's look and went toward her with a light laugh.

"Ha, ha! you're Leone, aren't you?" he cried.

"I am Leone, but you have not told me a word about yourself!" was the answer.

"Did you ever hear of Nicholas Norway?" he asked.

"Yes."

Nick could not suppress a start.

"Captain Bradd has spoken of me, then?"

"Not a word!" cried Leone. "I used to hear your name from the lips of a man who is now dead."

"Ha!"

"Lasso Pete, my old guardian. While he lay ill with the hurt which finally took his life he got flighty spells. I used to watch him. More than once during those moments he talked about Nicholas Norway."

"The deuce he did!" cried the Prince of Bismarck. "What would he say?"

"Not much that was coherent. It was a jumble of words about England, a crime of some kind, Nicholas Norway and Robert Graham. Sometimes he would talk about a woman who had been foully wronged, and about a husband who had suffered much. Lasso Pete was a strange man. He was not my father as some thought."

Nick was looking at Leone with a curiosity that bordered on impudence.

She suddenly caught him in the act.

"What do you see in me?" she exclaimed. "You must be the Nicholas Norway Lasso Pete used to rave about. It is all strange—very strange—that I should meet you here."

"It beats the planets!" was the response.

"Where did Lasso Peter get you?"

Leone shook her head.

"That was one of the puzzles which he would never solve for me," she replied.

"When did he get you?—how old were you?"

"I don't know."

"You have no recollection of any home but Pete's cabin?"

"I never knew any other."

Nick was silent for a moment like a person deliberating on a new policy.

"What became of your mother?" he suddenly asked the girl.

"I would give my life to know!" she exclaimed, and then she leaned toward him and clutched his arm.

"Do you know?" she went on, intense excitement in her eyes. "Has fortune sent you hither to tell me about the good creature who brought me into the world?"

Nick broke from her grasp and drew back looking at her.

"No, I never knew your mother!" he exclaimed. "I guess the secret died with Lasso Pete, if he ever knew. But this is not to the present. I am safe here you say?"

"Yes."

"If you remain here there may be a discovery not calculated to improve our interests."

"That is true," and Leone drew back. "When the right hour arrives I think I can find you an avenue to freedom."

A moment later Nick of Bismarck was the tenant of the dark closet.

"Holy Jehosaphat! that I should meet that creature here!" he exclaimed. "I wonder if the Shasta king, my old parol, suspects?"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE FLY IN THE WEB.

"SHE is here!"

A handsome man with sparkling black eyes confronted the Gold Grandee with these three words.

It was a short time after the arrest of Silver Sybil at her cabin, an event already witnessed.

Bradd Brownell looked at his lieutenant as if he could not believe that the hunt had proved successful. And in so short a time, too! Was the black-eyed woman mad?

"Where is she?" he asked, moving uneasily in his chair.

"In the round room."

"Under guard?"

"Buck and Burt at the door."

"What did she say?"

"She laughed at the prospect of getting into the palace."

"Then she denies the murder of Shadow Simon?"

"I did not directly accuse her."

The Shasta sport opened a drawer at his right and took something out.

"Bring her in," he continued, glancing up at Roscoe.

The man went out at once.

"Now that I've got the viper in my hands after Simon failed with her, I'll find out who she is and why she has played the leech in Condor City all this time," ejaculated Bradd when he was alone. "The game of vengeance is nearly played through and the best cards of the pack are in my hands. With this watchful, disturbing woman out of the way I have nobody to cope with. Nicholas Norway lost his last game, and the man who killed Monte and forced me by a sentence twenty words in all to set him free will not come back. The mob of Shasta is too much for him! Now let the woman come!" and Bradd watched the door by which Roscoe was to lead his prisoner into the room.

Several minutes passed away, and then there was a footstep just beyond the portal; the face of the Grandee flushed.

"She is here!" he said to himself. "Now for—the mastery!"

The next instant the door was thrown open, and Silver Sybil walked lightly into the elegant room.

A smile lurked at the corners of her finely-chiseled mouth; her eyes sparkled from the moment she caught sight of the man who awaited her.

Roscoe kept at her side as she swept across the carpet toward Bradd Brownell; he knew he was guarding a desperate prisoner.

The Grandee looked searchingly at Sybil for several moments before he spoke.

"You have come to see me at last!" he suddenly exclaimed.

"And at your invitation, too," was the answer.

How cool she was! What did this creature have in reserve?

"The blow you dealt awhile ago was not deadly at once," he went on.

Her start was slight, but all noticed it.

"The victim lived long enough to condemn the hand that handled the dagger."

Her figure straightened, and she said with a laugh:

"I thought the villain dropped without accusation, but I am not here to dispute the lips of the dead."

"Then you confess?"

"I gave Shadow Simon his death-blow. He was going to drag me into your presence before I was ready to come."

The Shasta Grandee looked at her amazed, and Roscoe moved closer to her side.

She caught the movement.

"You have to keep your minions at my elbow!" she exclaimed. "Even in the gold palace, where you are master, you have to watch your prisoners with an eagle eye. Is this the security of which you have boasted? Is this an exhibition of the power you exercise over Condor City?"

The Shasta sport bit his lip, for the woman's derision cut to the quick.

All at once he made a gesture which Roscoe understood. It meant that he was to be left alone with Silver Sybil, but despite his slavish faithfulness, Roscoe hesitated.

"I will signal for you," Bradd said, looking at his man, and with a glance at the woman, Roscoe turned and walked from the room.

"That was a cool trick you served Simon on the trail," resumed the Grandee when he found himself alone with the witch of the camp.

"He failed to do the work of his master. You sent him after me."

"I did."

"When did you discover that I was dangerous?"

"When you went south."

"Not until then?" laughed Sybil. "I was dangerous all the time! Is it possible that the spider in his golden web never looked upon me, the tenant of Cabin 29, as a person who wanted to sever the subtle threads of his spinning?"

What have you been dreaming about, Bradd Brownell? Has gold-getting absorbed you? Ah! I forget the game of love you have been playing."

He heard her through with eagerness, yet with a fear that she would make a revelation that might reach ears which he knew were not far away.

"You went south for a purpose," he continued, determined to keep her in the path he had decided on.

"Yes."

"You went south to come back with what you would call 'a cool hand' against me."

"Did Simon tell you?" exclaimed Sybil, leaning forward. "That Simon of yours knew more than he probably told! I went south for a 'hand' which I knew waited for its play. But you need not question me here. The sentence of Silver Sybil has been passed. The gold palace holds for her the vengeance you are eager to deal at this moment. But with all your slaves, captain, the last play will not be yours."

"We don't need prophets in Condor!" laughed the Gold Grandee, coloring at Sybil's words.

"Why, I have all the cards in my hands: I pull one and win on this side, another and succeed on that. Were you ever foolish enough, woman, to think that I was no match for your weak, vengeance-hunting hand?"

"I never thought!" was the retort. "I saw but one thing ahead and I kept it ever in view. I came from the death-bed of a woman to your kingdom."

"How? From whose death-bed?"

Sybil went forward till she almost touched the knees of the man in the chair.

"From the couch of Lady Harcourt in Santa Fe!" she exclaimed. "You heard somehow of her death; you sent Shadow Simon all that distance to get the truth, and to bring away what papers the woman may have left behind. What did your minion find? Nothing!—not even the corpse which he would have plundered. The papers—all she had left, everything except the child fell into my hands. They are where the hand of Robert Graham, now the Shastanabob, can never reach them. Look deep into my eyes, Bradd Brownell, as you want to be called in your golden web. Let your mind run back twenty years; let it cross the sea. Walk down the arbored aisles of Curling Castle. Stand on the cliffs that overlook the sea. Listen once more to the songs

that you have heard in the English moonlight when you played serpent to the Suffolk dove. Live over again the mock marriage in the old cathedral, when one of your tools served as rector. Have you forgotten all this? Have twenty years of varied life so changed the Suffolk girl that you cannot see her before you now?"

"My God!" rung from the Grandee's lips.

"Deserted, spurned, and lost in England, but found in the New World, in the heart of the Shasta wilderness!" cried Sybil. "The very air of this country has given me new blood. I have been the queen of a dozen gold camps since the last song on the Suffolk cliffs. And yet you wondered why I clung to Condor City, and why I hate you. Need I prolong the confession which to-night's events have wrung from me? Do you want the story of the stately home that fell into ruins when the Suffolk girl fled to the trail of vengeance in a New World? No! I will not tell you this. I have waited for months within a few yards of the wonder you built on this hill. I saw you increase your wealth day after day. I saw you enslave Condor and rule it with a rod of iron. Thank heaven! twenty years gave me a new face. They blotted out the features of the Suffolk girl, and gave her those which you failed to recognize. Now, Bradd Brownell, the prisoner at your bar will prove that your mandate does not keep back her hand."

The next instant something flashed in the gleam of the chandelier that was poised above the table.

"Not yet!" cried the Shasta sport, bounding up. "My Suffolk viper, you sting no one in Shasta-land."

He went toward Sybil with fire in his eyes, and his hands grasped her despite the downward sweep of the glittering steel.

At that moment the door flew wide open, and in leaped Roscoe.

"Roscoe! here!" shouted the California Grandee. "The sting of the viper escaped your eyes. Look at her hand."

The two men at Roscoe's back went with him toward Sybil, held by the hands of the Grandee.

They took her away, and with their bronze hands at her wrists, held her in the light for orders.

Bradd Brownell went back to his chair with an exultant countenance.

Without a word he opened a drawer and took out a sheet of paper.

Seizing a pen poised above an inkstand on the table, he wrote for a moment, and then landed the sheet to his lieutenant.

"To be read in the gallery," he said to Roscoe. "Take her away!"

At that moment the eyes of Sybil met those of the Gold Grandee.

A proud, unbending smile curled the woman's lips.

There was not a word of pleading, not a syllable for mercy. She only looked into the triumphant face of the Shasta king and gave him a warning triumphant glare.

He waved his hand impatiently toward the door and the men went forward.

As they neared it it opened without warning and a man came in.

Sybil saw him at once and their eyes met.

A tremor, a thrill seemed to pass through the Queen of Condor, and the next moment the two had parted.

"A little too late for the scene, Mr. Rustle-back!" laughed Bradd, as the man came forward. "The golden web has just caught a very ambitious fly. Roscoe has taken her away under private orders."

CHAPTER XXXV.

CRIMSON CLAUDE'S HAND.

WHEN Roscoe led Sybil away with the written orders in his hand, the King of Shasta did not know that he had not made a full report of his descent upon the woman's cabin. He was, therefore, unaware that a man had been taken with the witch of Condor.

Why had not Roscoe reported this?

Let us retrace our steps and see.

The man they did not know, but his appearance and the fact that he had been found with the woman who was wanted for the murder of Shadow Simon, made the captors hold him.

"It is not time for me to confront Bradd Brownell," passed through Sir Harold's mind. "Crimson Claude is in the palace now playing a game for me. I dare not go up and baffle him with my presence."

The party were half-way up the hill, and the house on the summit loomed between them and the stars.

All at once Captain Mystery jerked from the hand that held him and the next instant he was flying down the hill like a deer.

He vanished almost before the nabob's men could turn. They whipped out their revolvers, but the voice of Roscoe stayed their fingers from the triggers.

They could not stop to pursue a person already out of sight. They had another duty to perform and that was to take Silver Sybil to the man who waited for her on the hill.

This is why Roscoe did not report the capture of two persons instead of but one. He and his comrades agreed to let Captain Mystery go un-

mentioned as they thought he would at once leave the camp.

Silver Sybil rejoiced over Sir Harold's escape; she knew that almost certain discovery awaited him in the palace and she was content to face the Gold Grandee alone.

The fugitive fulfilled Roscoe's thoughts and wishes.

Fortune seemed to guide him to the stable where rested the horse he had ridden to Condor and while Sybil was unmasking herself to her old enemy he was riding down the trail which stretched to Yuba and beyond.

As for Sybil, she went down into the mine with the hand of Roscoe at her wrist.

In an open place with a lofty ceiling of dull stone the nabob's lieutenant stopped to read the orders he carried.

She watched him closely and saw a cloud overspread his brow. Disagreeable orders, she thought. When Roscoe had reached the end he turned and looked at the woman.

Her gaze was an unspoken question.

For a moment he seemed about to speak, but he held his tongue as if silence was what his master wanted and in a little while he was moving on once more.

"I know the secret now," mentally ejaculated Sybil as the journey lengthened. "The house on the hill stands over Bradd Brownell's bonanza."

It is not our intention to follow them, for to do so would be to see the Suffolk woman in the toils of the gold spider beyond redemption.

It was an hour later when Roscoe came back to the library. The room was empty, but a piece of paper, an envelope and a pencil lay on the table.

"This is for my report," muttered Roscoe adjusting the sheet as he dropped into the nabob's chair, and then for a minute or two he wrote like a rapid penman.

When he was through, he sealed what he had written and threw it into a drawer that fastened with a spring-lock. A moment later he got up and was about to quit the room, when a door opened.

"Ah! you, is it?" ejaculated the man who came forward.

"The captain isn't in at present," answered Roscoe.

"Never mind; he'll drop in soon. Don't be in a hurry, Roscoe."

The speaker was the man from Pine Notch, or, as we know him, the California Sleuth.

"You carried out orders, eh?" continued Claude. "The witch was inclined to be stubborn wasn't she?"

"No; she went with me like a child."

Then Roscoe's lips met as if he was not going to answer any more questions.

"You left her in good condition, eh, Roscoe?" smiled Claude, who had caught the lip movement.

There was no reply.

"Did you put her with the tenant of the little round cell?"

A sudden start showed astonishment on Roscoe's part.

"What person?" he exclaimed, staring at Claude.

"Ah! I have just mentioned him. The tenant of the little round cell, I said."

"There is no such person!"

"No?"

"This is a palace, not a prison!" ejaculated Roscoe.

"Ho, ho! you will have to excuse me!" cried the sleuth. "A man from Pine Notch is liable to make mistakes."

"Then you have just made one!"

"About the round cell, eh?"

No answer.

"I am going," suddenly said Roscoe. "If you want to wait for the captain, all right. But I can tell you that he may not come back any more to-night. At twelve, if he is not here, we turn off the light."

Roscoe, who had dropped back into the chair under Claude's eye, rose and threw a look toward the door.

"Hold on!" exclaimed the California spotter, looking him in the eye. "You don't want to be very communicative about the little cell. It has held a prisoner for nearly two years."

"Who told you?" blurted Roscoe.

"Discovery, my dear fellow, discovery!"

The nabob's lieutenant scowled.

"You've made yourself very fresh for a new man!" he grated.

"That is what I came here for."

"Then you are a spy!" and Roscoe started forward to be stopped by the click of the revolver that rose above the table and looked him in the face.

In a moment Tom Rustleback seemed transformed.

"There is no man in the round cell," he went on. "He was liberated a while ago and isn't far off at this moment."

"Who did it? You?"

"A hand that had a right to befriend Juarez Joe, the man who led your master to this gold bonanza. Look here, Roscoe. You know all the secrets of the Shasta palace. I want you to show me the prison of Silver Sybil."

"That cannot be done!"

"You mean you will not."

"Not if a thousand droppers war at my head!" came through the sport's teeth. "The boys in the mine—"

"There are no boys in the mine!" interrupted Claude. "An order has dismissed them all for twenty-four hours."

Roscoe looked puzzled.

"The order was written at this table on the captain's private paper. I delivered it."

"And you wrote it, too!" cried Roscoe.

The sleuth's eyes got an additional twinkle; they fairly snapped as he leaned a degree toward Roscoe.

"If you will not tell me where Sybil is, you will walk backward to the wall," he went on. The man's face instantly lost color.

"Afraid of one of the traps you helped to set?" laughed Claude. "Come, Roscoe! the carpenter ought to test his work. Back to the wall! I stand where I am. I believe Nicholas Norway was the last man to cross the floor to the wall. Captain Bradd told me the incident over his wine! It wasn't right to serve his old pard a trick like that; the man who cut the telegraph wires at Buzz Saw and saved him from the Colorado officers. Now to the wall, Roscoe. You always obey orders I believe."

Despite his smiles there was uncompromising sternness in the detective's mien.

Roscoe bit his lip and went toward the wall. All at once he was seen to take hope, as if he saw a chance despite the doom that threatened.

"A little further to the right, there, Roscoe," said Claude. "I see you know exactly what is behind you. An architect ought to know his work. Now—ah! Good-by, Roscoe!"

The next instant the wall opened at the man's back, opened by the pressure of Crimson Claude's foot on the carpet, and Roscoe, after a vain attempt to steady himself, fell out of view!

Then the opening closed, seemingly of its own accord, and the California detective turned a victorious face to the light.

"The man from Pine Notch is no slouch after all!" he ejaculated. "We will read Roscoe's report if we can find the combination of the drawer!"

For several moments he worked at the table and then opened the drawer in which the nabob's lieutenant had deposited his report.

The envelope lay in open view; he took it up and tore it open.

A single sentence greeted his eager eyes.

"Your commands have been obeyed to the letter, and the secret cell holds the black-eyed viper of Shasta."

To this report Roscoe had signed his name with a flourish.

"The secret cell! who can tell its location?" cried Claude crushing the paper in his hand.

"Ah! what does Leone know? She came here to find out everything. She ferreted out Juarez Joe; she has discovered the bonanza secret of the Gold Grandee, but the 'secret cell'! does she know of it?"

A moment later the California Sleuth crossed the room to the door that opened on the corridor.

"I must have this secret before I throw the final card!" he exclaimed.

"Halt!" call a voice that made him look up the stairs a few feet away. "Aha! I begin to see through your mask, my Pine Notch spy!"

Above him and leaning over the balustrade with his eyes in a blaze was Bradd Brownell the nabob.

It was but a bound to the steps, and the detective took it.

Then the hall rung with a loud report and revolver smoke wreathed the chandelier that hung from the ceiling.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE PRINCE OF BISMARCK AGAIN.

In spite of the shot a man went up the steps, clearing the smoke on his way, and heading straight for the person above.

Bradd Brownell had come upon the scene when the California detective thought him secure for awhile in another part of the palace! What had happened to arouse him?

The Shasta nabob left the library shortly after Roscoe's departure with Sybil.

He went to a room on a higher floor, a sleeping chamber and a private business room to which only the trusted like Roscoe had access.

In one corner of the apartment stood a heavy steel safe from which the Grandee took a pocket which he opened on the table.

He was immersed in the business of examining its contents when a man crept down the outside corridor on tiptoe.

This personage was handsome and eager-eyed.

He reached the door, and turning the knob gently, found it to be unlocked.

The Shasta nabob did not see the door open nor the face that appeared.

A man was in the room, but he knew it not.

"Captain?"

Bradd Brownell started and looked up.

"My God! You?" he exclaimed. "Why, I thought—"

"That the shaft-trap held me, eh?" was the

interruption, accompanied by a laugh. "It didn't hold me very long, as you see, and I am here in good trim, though a little sore for that tumble through darkness."

The Grandee looked too amazed to reply.

The man before him was Nick Norway.

"I'd like to know how we're going to compromise," the Prince of Bismarck went on. "I'm willing to retire for good from your service, for I'm opposed to walls that open at a fellow's back. Mebbe you'll say I've never been taken in, and I remember now that I didn't get to take the oath here. But I was with you years ago, when thar were carriages to be driven and telegraph wires to cut. I can go away as well as stay, but, by Jove! it seems to me that you're losing a grip here."

"Losing my grip in Condor?" exclaimed Bradd.

"What do you mean?"

"I heard what Sybil told you awhile ago."

"You?"

"Yes," smiled Nick. "Thar's a closet in the palace with a rope dangling in it. Ah! you recollect!"

"Well?"

"I slid down the rope and heard all of Sybil's story, her attempt on your life, the struggle, and the rush of Roscoe and pards to the rescue. I never thought that woman was the Suffolk dove. Holy Moses! captain, how she has kept her identity all these years!"

A smile came to the nabob's lips.

"She'll keep it a while longer!" he ejaculated.

"I gave Roscoe written orders, and he's carried them out ere this."

Nick's eyes fell on the papers on the table for a moment, and were then lifted to Bradd's gaze.

"I'll bet my head that I hold two secrets that you'd buy at my own figures," he said.

"The old game, Nicholas," was the reply.

"Just as you think. I have made two big discoveries since escaping from the shaft-trap. You don't know the girl, Leone—the beautiful creature you are to make your wife and the queen of the golden palace. I say you don't know her."

"Why don't I? She is, or was, Lasso Pete's ward. He picked her up somewhere—a waif with good blood in her veins. She's good enough for me, eh, Nicholas? Altogether too good for you, I fancy."

Nick did not enter into the gold sport's merri-ment.

"What would you give for the truth about Leone's parentage?" he asked.

"If you say you have discovered it since entering the palace I'll give that!" And Bradd snapped his fingers in his old pard's face.

"Very well, I now come to secret number two. What will you pay for a glimpse at the past life and the present designs of the man from Pine Notch? I guess I haven't kept eyes and ears shut since coming here!"

The gold nabob started slightly, and gave Nick a searching look.

"You can't tell me any such stories," he cried. "Besides, Nicholas, I can touch a secret spring under my feet, and the floor where you are sitting will give way like the wall did!"

Bradd Brownell spoke with a coolness that sent a thrill through the Prince of Bismarck.

"In the first place you have no secrets—"

"I have two."

"Secondly, you can't sell them for a dollar to me."

"But I can tell you for nothing," snapped Nick.

"But you will not," said Bradd, eying him.

"Will you listen?"

The Shasta nabob turned to his papers as if he intended to ignore the man before him.

Nick bit his lips.

"Well, in the first place I've found Lady Harcourt's child," he went on.

"You say so. Prove it."

"Leone is that child."

A quick start was the Grandee's response, and he was once more looking into his old confederate's face.

"That would make my revenge complete if she were," he muttered.

"She has the tell-tale mark on her arm—the scar made by the nurse when Leone was a baby," continued Nick. "She doesn't know where Lasso Pete picked her up, but I presume he told Buzzard Belt all in the papers he left him."

"I tried to get those papers!" exclaimed Bradd. "The attempt cost Monte his life, and humiliated me before the whole camp for I had to let the slayer go."

"He had a secret, eh?"

"A secret and a threat!" hissed the nabob.

"Now go on."

"I know that Leone is Sir Harold Harcourt's child."

"I never suspected it, but if she is, by Jupiter, Nicholas, I'll complete my revenge when I make her mistress of the palace to-morrow."

"To-morrow, eh?" ejaculated Nick.

"To-morrow! The boys are to have a holiday."

"They've got it now."

"No! they are in the mines."

"There is where you don't know it all, cap-

tain," laughed Nick. "My opinion is that the enemy has the call on you. Do you really think I wanted to sell my secrets? When you had purchased them you would touch the button in the floor and I would tumble to heaven knows where! You can't escape the cunning of the man who has just hoodwinked you."

It seemed to give Nick great pleasure to tell the Shasta nabob this.

He leaned back in his chair and looked at his old master with a malicious grin on his countenance.

"Let me come down to hard-pan again, captain," he suddenly went on. "I was wandering over the house a while ago, and I happened to find a little door set in the wall of a dark room. With the point of my knife-blade I pried it open, and found, what?—a number of wires that ran in every direction like the spokes of a wheel. They were the wires that work the traps of the golden palace. I saw this at a glance. Well, captain, with the remembrance of my late tumble in my mind I looked about for something to cut them. I found an old hatchet.

Bradd Brownell started toward the man in the chair with a cry.

His foot seemed to press the floor at the time.

"I guess I cut 'em all, captain, seeing that the one under your feet has just refused to work," continued Nick, with a broadening smile. "I played smash with 'em anyhow. When I told Claude he laughed."

"Claude?" echoed the nabob.

"The man from Pine Notch!" replied Nick, coolly. "Why, haven't you discovered yet that he's Buzzard Belt, alias Crimson Claude, the California Sleuth?"

There was a mad exclamation and Bradd Brownell left the chair.

"Hunted down at last!" Nick resumed, looking up into his almost pallid face. "He's found both of us and he knows that Leone is Sir Harold's child."

"Where is he?"

The question was hoarse and harsh.

It was the voice of a desperate man, the roar of a tiger brought to bay.

"You're liable to find him 'most anywhere," answered Nick. "He carried a note to the men, and it gave them liberty for twenty-four hours. He has taken Monte's place with a vengeance, captain."

The Gold Grandee was midway between the table and the door.

He forgot that Nick might be the spy's accomplice; he thought of nothing but the cool deception the California Sleuth had practiced.

Nick Norway saw him quit the room in the twinkling of an eye.

"I guess I'm getting even!" the Prince of Bismarck ejaculated.

The door shut with a bang behind Bradd and a musical click told Nick that he was a prisoner.

He got up and went forward.

The next moment he caught the knob and gave it a wrench, but it would not yield.

Then came the sound of a pistol-shot, and the loud voices of writhing, struggling men.

Nicholas Norway suddenly got the look of a mad wolf.

He stepped back, looked at the lofty door, and then threw himself against it with all his might!

Crash! crash! and Nick landed in the corridor like an athlete in the ring!

The next moment he bounded away, passed a young girl who rushed white-faced from a room, and reached two men. One was holding the other against the wall, with two hands at his throat.

"I guess the game is about played out," said the victor, glancing over his shoulder at Nick. "The only wire you did not cut got rid of Roscoe."

The speaker was the California Sleuth.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AT LAST.

THE tableau revealed by the light in the corridor was a startling one.

"If I had suspected for a moment that there would be no California ferret to triumph now!" came from Bradd Brownell's throat.

"There's no doubt of that," was the reply. "We never show our hands when we want to rake in the stakes."

The Gold Grandee threw a glance at the Bismarck sport, whose face showed a grin of delight.

Why had he not spoken sooner?

If at that moment the nabob could have wrenched himself from the grasp that held him, he would have leaped straight at his old confederate. The look he gave Nick made the latter recoil as if he expected a stroke of revenge.

"Now, captain, where is the secret chamber?" asked Crimson Claude.

"Ha! didn't Roscoe tell you?"

"No."

"Then we will let the secret be his," and Bradd's lips closed firmly behind the last word.

"You will not divulge it?"

"Ask Roscoe, I tell you."

At that moment a man, haggard in appearance, and with an unnaturally bright eye, stepped in front of the Shasta Grandee.

Their looks met.

"That man can keep the secret, but we can find Silver Sybil," he said, covering Bradd with his finger. "I have not lived in the little round chamber nearly two years for nothing. I see in the dark like an owl. I owe my life to the girl who found my cell when she was lost in the bonanza, and not to that infamous gold-bug. He would have killed me if I had not told him that I knew of another bonanza as big as the one we stand over now. It was to get this secret that he kept me, Juarez Joe, shut up in the round cell. Once a week a voice would come in at the door and ask me if I was ready to divulge. Captain, let me compliment you on the cool game you have played so long, but the California Sleuth holds all the stakes and the player as well."

There was no answer.

A few minutes later the nabob of Shasta sat bound in the sumptuous library, and the man who guarded him was his old pard, Nick Norway, while Leone occupied a chair near the table watching both.

Under ground two men were threading the labyrinthine passages of the bonanza—Crimson Claude and Juarez Joe, in search of Sybil.

Every now and then they struck the walls with hammers and listened to the echoes. What had become of the black-eyed witch?

"The woman is dead," exclaimed the detective at last. "The secret held by Roscoe was a dead one. Let us go back."

Juarez Joe, however, was not willing.

He persuaded Claude to press on until at last a feeble cry came back in response to the hammers.

The two men sprung forward, the trail descended suddenly and they hurried down into the bowels of darkness.

Again and again they struck the echoing walls.

At last they stood before a square stone set into the rock, and their lights showed them footprints in the fine dust at their feet.

A little hard work by the two eager men removed the stone, and with a joyful cry a woman sprung into the light.

It was Silver Sybil!

Found at last, and by the perseverance of Juarez Joe.

Bradd Brownell did not start when the witch of Condor came into the library. He merely looked at her and brought his lips firmly together.

"Now for my revenge!" suddenly cried the woman, catching a pistol from Nick's hand.

"Another person has a prior claim on him!" ejaculated Leone, and Sybil felt the girl's fingers encircle her wrist and she was held back.

"Ah! you mean Captain Mystery, do you not?" she asked, looking into Leone's face.

"Sir Harold Harcourt, the man whom I believe is my father!" was the response.

"Your father? I guessed that some time ago. I will not touch the man yonder, although he played hawk to the Suffolk dove. Sir Harold will avenge my wrongs when he strikes for his!" and she went back with a farewell look at the Gold Grandee.

Before the night was far spent five horses were grouped just outside of Condor City.

Near them stood six people; two were females and one of the four men had a tight bandage over his mouth and his hands were pinioned at his sides.

He was helped upon the back of one of the steeds by the men, one of whom held the bridle with a firm grip.

The bound man, of course, was the Shasta king.

He had thought that the California Sleuth could not conduct him through the mountain camp without discovery, but this hope had vanished.

As if to complete the victory, the heavens had suddenly become dark, and not a star threw its light upon the scene.

Behind the group and on the summit of the hill stood the gold palace, now with but a single tenant, Roscoe, in the depths of the shaft trap.

"Ready?" asked one of the men of the little group.

"Ready!" responded the voice of the Prince of Bismarck, and as the five horses started forward the sixth person stepped back and waved a farewell salute.

The next moment he was going up the hill alone.

He entered the deserted house and cast a look of triumph about him wherever he went. He threw himself into the Grandee's easy-chair, and covered several sheets of foolscap with bold chi-rography before he looked up. If the reader could have looked over his shoulder he would have seen that the first page bore the following caption:

"TO CONDOR CITY AND THE WORLD!"

THE STATEMENT OF JUAREZ JOE.

Having written what he had to say to his satisfaction, he took a turn about the palace.

In one of the rooms of the secret mine he fastened his "statement" to one of the huge quartz-crushers.

He knew that nobody would find it until twenty-four hours had fled.

Perhaps he wanted this time.

It was after midnight when the Grandee's old prisoner, Juarez Joe, left the house and went down the hill again.

He glided from the camp like a shadow, and the darkness beyond took him in.

Fifty miles south of Condor City the day after Crimson Claude's big, bold play, a man coming out of a cabin was suddenly confronted by a group of five people. All were well mounted.

The solitary inhabitant looked amazed.

"In God's name, what is this?" he ejaculated.

"I recognize Silver Sybil. Tell me, woman, what happened to get you out of the clutches of the Shasta spider?"

The woman, whom he addressed with the excitement of a man whose nerves are at a tension, laughed as she leaned forward.

"It means that the Grandee has lost!" she exclaimed. "It means, Sir Harold, that the New World has given up the lost child; that God has placed in your hands the man who, eighteen years ago, carried off wife and daughter, the man who robbed you in Denver when you were Gold Dresden. Behold him! This is he! This is Robert Graham, alias Edwin Alden, the Denver despoiler, and Bradd Brownell, the Gold Grandee!"

The man on the ground looked at the bound person whom Sybil touched as she spoke.

His eyes got a sudden flash and a tremor of hatred shook his frame.

"At last!" he said through set teeth. "Thank heaven!"

The next moment one of the mounted men leaned toward the solitary prisoner.

"I keep my promise. I give you the chance!" he whispered at the Grandee's ear, and a knife cut his bonds at his back.

In an instant a wild cry rose from Sybil's lips, and then Bradd Brownell was seen dashing away!

It was the work of a second.

"Here! take this!" cried Nick Norway, thrusting a cocked Winchester into Sir Harold's hands. "I gave my old pard a chance for life for old times' sake. If you miss you can come back upon me!"

The Gold Grandee was still in the camp riding for life!

All at once the rifle struck the Englishman's shoulder and then a flash, and a report.

"It was no miss!" cried Nick as a man tumbled from a horse and struck the dust.

Sir Harold stood silent like a man in a maze. The vengeance that had waited eighteen years had been satiated.

And the career of the Gold Grandee was at an end!

We can now hasten to the close. Happy in the presence of Leone, who was his daughter, Sir Harold Harcourt, or "Captain Mystery," was ready to turn back, and a few days later the couple reached San Francisco.

There the handsome sleuth, Crimson Claude, declared a love which had long tugged at his heart-strings, and Leone—under her ancestral name, Leone Harcourt—became a bride. The detective, as Buzzard Belt, had suspected that Leone was Sir Harold's child, and the last papers left by Lasso Pete had confirmed his theory.

How he guarded those papers we have seen. They cost Monte his life.

Nick Norway evidently feared that Sir Harold would demand satisfaction of him as he had been Bradd Brownell's accomplice in the abduction of Lady Harcourt and her child, and shortly after the glided outlaw's death he disappeared.

Since that event the Prince of Bismarck has not showed up in any part of the Wild West, not, at least, in his true character.

Some days after the last play in the palace Juarez Joe appeared in Condor City at the head of one hundred determined men.

The toughs who held the fort had read and digested his "statement," and when they heard from his lips the story of the Grandee's crimes and his doom, to Joe's surprise they stepped aside and told him to take possession of the bonanza which had been taken from him by the Shasta king.

From that day it was Juarez Joe's property.

When he had enriched himself from its resources, he suddenly destroyed the palace, sold the mine to a stock company, and settled down to a millionaire's life.

The ending of the Shasta game lost to the world its most indefatigable sleuth, for Crimson Claude, with his oath fulfilled, resolved to hunt no more men. His last triumph was his greatest.

Hold! What about Silver Sybil? asks the reader as we pause.

Oh, Sybil is truly married now, and her husband is the Grandee's old prisoner—Juarez Joe!

THE END.

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